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**ABSURDIST ECHOES AND THE EXISTENTIAL REINCARNATION
OF THE SELF: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF CORMAC
MCCARTHY'S *THE ROAD*, *SUTTREE*, AND RICHARD WRIGHT'S
NATIVE SON, *THE OUTSIDER***

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Declaration

I hereby declare that my doctoral thesis, entitled “Absurdist Echoes and the Existential Reincarnation of the Self: A Comparative Study of Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*, *Suttree*, and Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, *The Outsider*,” is the result of my own original investigation, except where due acknowledgment is made to the published works of other researchers in the field.

Date:

Signed: Mrs. Nadia AISSOU

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Dedication

To the greatest man in my existence: my dear father, who believed in me and encouraged me to chase my dreams and seek success. His support empowers me to sustain the obstacles I went through,

To my dear mother, whom I can never thank enough, your douaa is my weaponry in life,

To the love of my life, my husband Billel, for his support, encouragement, love, and patience,

To my dear sons Mohammed Housseem and Wanis, the begetters of my happiness,

To my brothers Fouad and Sidali, the pillars that support my back,

To my sisters Chaimaa, Zahra, and Serine, my soulmates,

Abstract

The present doctoral thesis aims to compare the works of two Southern American writers: Richard Wright and Cormac McCarthy. Precisely, *Native Son*, *The Outsider*, *Suttree*, and *The Road* share a lucid propensity towards Absurdism coupled with existential convictions that, in turn, result in the reincarnation of the self. The corpus demonstrates the writers' preoccupation with the dilemmas of the age, which are brought to art with the most distinct narrative style. The study claims that the texts of Wright and McCarthy reveal their adoption and adaptation of the Sartrean-Camusian discourse. Therefore, within the confines of Camus' *The Absurd* and Sartre's Existentialism, the examination of concepts such as alienation- be it self-alienation or communal- death or suicide in addition to the notions of freedom of choice and revolt in the four novels proves the Southern writers' influence by the doctrine of the French philosophers. It, therefore, divulges their success in appropriating the discourse to the American novel. The research also highlights the novelists' stance on the issue of God's death as it explores their own religious inclinations. The analyses of the narrative techniques relied on by McCarthy and Wright in the selected works confirm their atheism. In other words, the thesis attests that both writers advocate the death of God by asserting that the deconstruction of the Divine is a rebirth of the self that restores its equilibrium and shows its readiness to fight for authentic existence in a Godless, absurd world.

Keywords: Richard Wright, Cormac McCarthy, Absurdism, existential convictions, Sartrean-Camusian discourse, death of God, rebirth of the self

Table of Contents

Declaration	I
Acknowledgments.....	II
Dedication	III
Abstract	IV
General Introduction	1
Chapter One: The Alien Being and the Absurd Conflict between the Self and Community in Cormac McCarthy's and Richard Wright's Selected Novels	34
I. A Stranger to Oneself: Richard Wright's and Cormac McCarthy's Perception of Self-alienation	34
1. Thomas Bigger's Pursuit of an Authentic Self in Richard Wright's <i>Native Son</i>	34
2. Cross Damon's Newly Created Self in Richard Wright's <i>The Outsider</i>	41
3. Cornelius Suttree's Self-Deception and the Quest for Self-Creation in Cormac McCarthy's <i>Suttree</i>	45
4. Flight into the Self: Cormac McCarthy's <i>The Road</i> and the Issue of Self-definition.....	51
II. Strangers to the Communal Gatherings: R. Wright's and C. McCarthy's Appropriation of the Sartrean-Camusian Discourse	60
1. Thomas Bigger: The Estranged Violator of Chicago's Social Standards in R. Wright's <i>Native Son</i>	60
3. Cornelius Suttree: An Enigmatic Stranger of the Tennessee River in McCarthy's <i>Suttree</i>	72
4. The World of Fugitives: A Redefinition of Social Alienation in C. McCarthy's <i>The Road</i>	77
III. The Strangers' Escape into an Alternative World in R. Wright's and C. McCarthy's Novels	83
1. Thomas Bigger's Mythical Strange Land and Cross Damon's Dream World in Wright's <i>Native Son</i> and <i>The Outsider</i>	83

2. The McCarthyian Alternative Space in <i>Suttree</i> and <i>The Road</i>	87
--	----

Chapter Two: Between Suicide, Freedom of Choice, and Revolt Paradigms: The Rebirth Of The Free Self in the Novels of Wright and McCarthy 95

I. Suicide: A Paradise in Disguise in Wright's and McCarthy's Novels.....	95
---	----

1. The Wrightian Paradigm of Philosophical Suicide in <i>Native Son</i>	98
---	----

2. The Quest for Death and Philosophical Suicide of the Damons in <i>The Outsider</i>	104
---	-----

1. The Trap of Nothingness: <i>Suttree</i> and Suicide.....	110
---	-----

2. The Suicide of the Mother: A Nihilist View of Life	118
---	-----

II. Challenging the Absurd in Cormac McCarthy's and Richard Wright's Works.....125

1. The Restoration of the Black's Freedom of Choice and the Birth of the Rebellious Self in <i>Native Son</i>	131
---	-----

2. Cross Damon: A Rebellious Black Hero Who Is Condemned to Be Free	139
---	-----

3. <i>Suttree</i> : A Transition from Nihilism to the Freedom of Action	145
---	-----

4. The Reincarnation of the Free Absurd Hero in McCarthy's <i>The Road</i>	154
--	-----

A. Sisyphusian Revolt of the Father and the Son	154
---	-----

B. Myth Appropriation and the Quest for Project in Life.....	161
--	-----

Chapter Three: "God or no God": The Death of God and the Reincarnation of the Self in the Selected Novels of Richard Wright and Cormac mccarthy 172

I. "When Gods Die" in the Fiction of Richard Wright.....	172
--	-----

1. Wright and the Christian Faith	172
---	-----

2. The Sacred No More: Literary Techniques Proclaiming the Reincarnation of the Self through God's Death in <i>Native Son</i> and <i>The Outsider</i>	178
---	-----

2.1. "I Want to Be Happy in <i>this World</i> ": Killing God in the Narrative of Bigger Thomas	180
--	-----

2.1.1. Symbolism Revealing the Murder of God in <i>Native Son</i>	181
---	-----

2.1.1.1 Bigger Thomas.....	181
----------------------------	-----

2.1.1.2.	The Church.....	184
2.1.1.3.	The Cross.....	186
2.1.2.	The Divine Through a Splintered Lens: Narrative Perspective in Native Son.....	190
2.2.	Deconstructing the Divine: Literary Techniques Unveiling God's Death in The Outsider.....	192
2.2.1.	Confessions of the Self: Monologues as a Revelation of Godlessness	193
2.2.2.	Fragments of Faith: A Dialogic Inquiry	196
II.	“There's No God, And We Are His Prophets”: Does Cormac McCarthy Kill God in His Fiction?	201
1.	Cormac McCarthy Between Faith in God and Atheism	201
2.	Suttree and The Road: The Curse of God and the Rebirth of the Self Conceived Through Literary Techniques.....	207
2.1.	Narrative Choices Announcing the Self as a Heir of God in <i>Suttree</i>	207
2.1.1.	Multiple Viewpoints, One Void: The Narrative Voices in <i>Suttree</i>	207
2.1.2.	Solitary Voice Annihilating the Shadow of God in Dialogues	214
2.1.3.	The Unresolved End Echoing the Collapse of the Divine.....	219
2.2.	Silencing Divinity: Techniques Reflecting the Death of God in <i>The Road</i>	222
2.2.1.	Symbolism in <i>The Road</i>	223
2.2.1.1.	The Symbolism of the Novel's Title	223
2.2.1.2.	The Journey to the South.....	226
2.2.1.3.	Ely: God's Assassin.	229
2.2.2.	The Divine Withdrawal Through Imagery in <i>The Road</i>	232
2.2.2.1.	The Imagery of the Messiah.....	232
2.2.2.2.	Godless World.....	235
2.2.2.3.	The Rebirth of the Self in Images	237

General conclusion.....242

Bibliography.....253

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

When history books are spread in front of us, the Twentieth century looms with humanity's greatest achievements on the one side, while there appear, on the other, the ruins of a great war. It is the Second World War that has confronted man with the grim silence of the world, which offers nothing but more queries that, eventually, make him easy prey to despair. The unfamiliarity of the scenery brought man face to face with dread: his quietus. That massive extermination, coupled with outrageous devastation, has generated a looming threat to humanity. The imminent death, in turn, laid bare the frailty of faith in times of vulnerability when a man dares to question the existence of God. Additionally, the hopelessness, faithlessness, and powerlessness of the modern man have bred feelings of estrangement and compelled him to question the very essence of his existence. All this culminates with the flood that wrapped the realm of intellectuals: Existentialism.

Existentialism, along with, so to speak, its variant Absurdism continues to shape the world's perception of fiction writers in the post-1945 and post-modern era. The literature of Richard Wright captures man's desire for order to the chaos of the age and meaning to the absurdity of his days and nights. In his depiction of existential despair, philosophical and physical suicide, in addition to excessive violence, *Native Son* and *The Outsider* compel us to question what resides behind the choice of such themes in the works of a southern black writer whose literature is categorized as protest fiction. The prime model that Wright offers reveals an incomparable mélange of art and philosophy. This marriage is attuned to the dilemmas of the era, and its alliance with racism first helps to transcend the comfort zone where his contemporaries opt to dwell. Then, his later works reveal a shift to universality that has, eventually, broken that commitment to Southern themes like *The Outsider*. On the other hand, his successor Cormac McCarthy carries the fire to the fiction of the new century. Sharing the same regional belonging

as Wright, McCarthy's texts are taken as heralds of the end of the world. The existential despair and anxiety that have characterized the post-war era are once again manifested and re-emerged in the age of technology. A reality that McCarthy's *Suttree* and *The Road* highlight. The two novels are a literary elucidation of his philosophical perception of life. Hence, what motivates us to undertake such research is to demonstrate that these Southern writers have followed the same path in their attempt to reincarnate the existential self.

To contribute to the fields of research of Wright and McCarthy, one is required to go through the literature written about the philosophical inclination of both writers, with more emphasis on what has been said about their nihilism, existentialism, atheism, and even absurdism. Though a number of aspects have been dealt with by other scholars in the field, some others require more investigation. In this regard, a review of the literature is significant to help us identify the gap that necessitates further examination.

Robert Solomon suggests that Existentialism is the result "of the Renaissance, the Reformation, the growth of science, the decline of Church authority, the French Revolution, the growth of mass militarism and technocracy, two world wars, the 'triumph' of capitalism, and the sudden onslaught of globalism and its consequences."¹ It puts the human subject as a top priority: a philosophy that allows him to consider other possibilities in a godless, absurd world. But when such a doctrine conquered the realm of literature, the echoes of a new phase were looming on the horizon.

¹ Robert Solomon, *Existentialism*, ed. 2 (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2004), xii.

² Simone de Beauvoir, *La Force de l'âge* (Paris: Folio, 1989), 416.

³ Brivic Sheldon, "Conflict of Values: Richard Wright's "Native Son," *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 7, no. 3 (1974):

American writers like Herman Melville, William Faulkner, and Ernest Hemingway are known among critics to have introduced new themes to American literature. These themes have driven late scholars to categorize them as existential sympathizers. Their works expose what De Beauvoir calls ‘a philosophy of experience’ in art that stems from their life events rather than philosophical doctrine.² Moreover, in the post-1945 era, the question of man’s position in the world, the meaning of life, and the sense of estrangement turned out to be the fashion of the age. These themes dominated Southern fiction due to the particularities of life in the South.

The Southern American writer Richard Wright is among those leading figures whose early writings disclose his concern with the question of existence and the quest for meaning in a senseless universe. The publication of *Native Son* has contributed to altering the world’s perception of Blacks in the United States. However, early criticism classified it as a protest novel that exposes the Blacks’ suffering from racism. In this regard, James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison denounced the protagonist’s violent nature, the negative representation of the Afro-American culture, and the pessimistic tone that the writer adhered to³. Their critique aims to demonstrate the failure of Wright in his protest against racial discrimination. While Robert Bone’s and Edward Margolies’ readings of the novel reveal a philosophical inconsistency of Wright that they consider the main flaw of the work⁴. The Latter, in addition to Russell Carl Brignano, are among the first critics who referred to the existential dimension of Wright’s novel. Margolies and Brignano have dealt with Existentialism in relation to other philosophies, such as Marxism, which has led them to conclude that the writer has failed in the selection of a clear philosophical

² Simone de Beauvoir, *La Force de l’âge* (Paris: Folio, 1989), 416.

³ Brivic Sheldon, “Conflict of Values: Richard Wright’s “Native Son,” *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 7, no. 3 (1974): 231.

⁴ Edward Margolies, *The Art of Richard Wright* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969), 113- 14.

stream for his novel. In other words, they believe that the presence of more than one philosophy is a weakness rather than a richness. However, Brivic Sheldon in his *Conflict of Values: Richard Wright's "Native Son"* has embraced this diversity, or what is termed as “ambivalence” in the novel, because, for him, it constitutes the complexity of the novel which justifies its weighty status among other canonical works.⁵ Though Sheldon has confessed Wright’s existential inclination in a footnote, he neglected it in his analysis to focus merely on the political and psychological sides.

These critics have failed to see the richness of the novel and the gift of Wright, the artist, who was able to bring different discourses into the same work to eventually release a masterpiece that survives and succeeds in securing a prestigious status even in our time. Years after its publication, *Native Son* continues to exercise a large influence on many Afro-American writers. The failure that some critics have pointed out proves their own failure to read Wright, whose philosophy defines the artistry of his literary productions.

In a like manner, the late criticism attempts to offer a convincing interpretation of the protagonist’s crimes- Thomas Bigger. Therefore, his identity crisis and violence have been analyzed from different angles. Masaya Takeuchi suggests an analysis of Bigger’s divided self which she considers a possible explanation of his violence. This divided nature is basically the outcome of being exposed to two conflicting social forces that have left him wounded and lost in the midst of the crossroads.⁶ At her sight, the protagonist’s inner instability is expressed in his misogynistic attitudes toward his female victims: Mary Dalton and Bessie Mears.⁷ Similarly,

⁵ Sheldon, “Conflict of Values,” 232.

⁶Masaya Takeuchi, “Bigger’s Divided Self: Violence and Homosociality in “Native Son,” *Studies in American Naturalism* 4, no. 1 (Summer 2009): 56.

⁷Takeuchi, “Bigger’s Divided Self,” 56.

Anna M. Gee has addressed the themes of violence and identity crisis in the novel, as she finds them inseparable. She asserts that violence for Blacks is the only possible means that frees them from the Whites' objectification that denies their humanity.⁸ In other words, the protagonist's violent nature is perceived as a way to overcome the feelings of shame before Whites and an act of asserting oneself. The echo of these ideas is also identified in the articles of Naemeka Obioma's *Richard Wright: Climate of Fear and Violence* and Matthews Kadeshia's *Black Boy No More? Violence and the Flight from Blackness in Richard Wright's Native Son*. Conversely, Joko Sengova has put native identity and alienation into the same pot, suggesting the inseparability of the issue of identity from alienation.⁹ He highlights the concepts of the Blacks' linguistic register and their cultural background, which contribute to their alienation from the Other. However, none of the literature examined has discussed the notion of alienation within the context of the Sartrean-Camusian discourse, even those who confessed the existential leaning of Wright in the novel. Except the article of Friday Romanus Okpo, which is an attempt to use the archetypal literary criticism to argue that the Blacks' suffering from racism echoes the Sisyphean struggle that Camus highlights in *The Myth of Sisyphus*.¹⁰

Alessandro Portelli's article puts emphasis on the distinct nature of Thomas Bigger. He finds Wright's character a hero who achieves freedom and humanity merely through linguistic mastery¹¹. He divulges the change or the inner progress through Bigger's speech to argue for the

⁸ Anna M. Gee, "Violence and Identity in Richard Wright's *Native Son*," *Criterion: A Journal of Literary Criticism* 9, no. 2 (2016): 14.

⁹ Joko Sengova, "Native Identity and Alienation in Richard Wright's 'Native Son' and Chinua Achebe's 'Things Fall Apart': A Cross-Cultural Analysis," *The Mississippi Quarterly* 50, no. 2, Special Issue: Richard Wright (1997): 327.

¹⁰ Friday Romanus Okpo, "The Myth of Sisyphus in Richard Wright's *Native Son*," *SAGE Open* (2021): 1.

¹¹ Alessandro Portelli, "Everybody's Healing Novel: 'Native Son' And Its Contemporary Critical Context," *The Mississippi Quarterly* 50, no. 2 (Spring 1997): 255, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26476275>

construction of his heroic self.¹² While Joyce Ann Joyce, in a book-length study, relies on New Criticism to claim that *Native Son* is a tragic novel. She devotes her first chapter to discussing the existential and the Naturalistic aspects present in the work.¹³ Though some critics have identified some traces of Existentialism in the novel, only Katherine Fishburn's *Richard Wright's Heroes: The Faces of a Rebel Victim* confesses the presence of some absurdist elements in the work¹⁴.

From *Native Son* to *The Outsider*, Wright shifts from a philosophy of experience that stems from his life in the South to a clear philosophical stance. Sophia Emmanouilidou is among the first critics who published an article on self-identity in *The Outsider*. Though she admits Wright's existential maturity in the novel, her analysis is based on exploring the sociopolitical and cultural constraints of self-identity.¹⁵ On the other hand, Amritjit Singh interprets the existential elements in the novel as a dramatization of the tenets of the philosophy.¹⁶ In other words, she claims that Wright intends to disclose the inadequacy of Existentialism to cope with the rising issues of the modern world.¹⁷ However, Charles I. Glicksberg, in his two articles *Existentialism in The Outsider* and *The God of Fiction*, has pointed out some notions that Albert Camus has initiated in his philosophical and literary works in Wright's novel.¹⁸ However, he claims that the protagonist of the work is more nihilist than absurdist.¹⁹ Correspondingly, Edward

¹² Portelli, "Everybody's Healing Novel," 256.

¹³ Joyce Ann Joyce, *Richard Wright's Art of Tragedy?* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1986), xvi.

¹⁴ Katherine Fishburn, *Richard Wright's Hero: The Faces of a Rebel Victim* (Metuchen, New Jersey: Scarecrow Press, 1977), 55.

¹⁵ Sophia Emmanouilidou, "Construction and Deconstruction: Self-Identity in Abeyance in Richard Wright's *The Outsider*," ed. Tirtha Prasad Mukhopadhyay, *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities* 3, no.4 (1953): 555.

¹⁶ Amritjit Singh, "Richard Wright's *The Outsider*: Existentialist Exemplar Or Critique?," *CLA Journal* 27, no. 4 (June 1984): 368.

¹⁷ Singh, "Richard Wright's *The Outsider*," 368.

¹⁸ Charles Glicksberg, "Existentialism in *The Outsider*," *Four Quarters*, 7 (January 1958): 20.

¹⁹ Charles Glicksberg, "The God of Fiction," *Colorado Quarterly*, 7 (Autumn 1958): 207-220.

Margolies has also identified the Camusian spirit in the Afro-American version of *The Stranger*.²⁰ He is among the first critics who noted the existence of some similarities between Meursault and Damon, the protagonist of Wright's novel. It is on this ground that some later scholars like Yoshinobu Hakutani have chosen to conduct an inter-textual study of Camus' *The Stranger* and Wright's *The Outsider*. His study does not go beyond discussing similar themes and characterization of the two protagonists from both works.²¹

Following this premise, Anne O. Cauley attempts to elaborate on the Wrightian concept of freedom in *The Outsider* with regard to the particularity of Black culture. Following some textual inklings, O. Cauley concludes that Wright's perception of freedom is distinct and is mainly Wrightian since it is the upshot of his experience in the American South that was later cultivated in Europe.²² However, Steven J. Rubin stands in opposition to this view, suggesting that Wright's conceptualization of freedom is better interpreted when perceiving it in the context of revolt against a living reality.²³ In this regard, he traces similar conceptions between Wright's perspective of freedom in both *Native Son* and *The Outsider* and Camus' notion of revolt exposed in *The Stranger*.²⁴ He, therefore, claims that the true essence of freedom lies in man's move to action by challenging his reality.²⁵ Unluckily, Rubin has limited his analysis to the ideas exposed

²⁰ Edward Margolies, *The Art of Richard Wright* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969), 135.

²¹ Yoshinobu Hakutani, "Richard Wright's *The Outsider* and Albert Camus' *The Stranger*," *The Mississippi Quarterly* 42, no. 4 (Fall 1989): 368.

²² Anne O. Cauley, "A Definition of Freedom in the Fiction of Richard Wright," *CLA: College Language Association Journal* 19, no. 3 (March, 1976): 329, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44321617>

²³ Steven J. Rubin, "Richard Wright and Albert Camus: The Literature of Revolt," *The International Fiction Review* 8, no. 1 (1981): 12, <https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/IFR/article/view/13478>

²⁴ Rubin, "Richard Wright and Albert Camus," 13.

²⁵ Rubin, "Richard Wright and Albert Camus," 13.

in Camus' *The Stranger* with very little reference to his other philosophical works, where the concept is detailed.

In addition to the above perspectives, the article by Tommie Shelby that appears in *The Cambridge Companion to Richard Wright* is significant since some of the ideas it proposes are not far from the stance the current study suggests. Shelby sides with the view that Wright's Existentialism in *The Outsider* is given a psychological dimension.²⁶ This is what he termed a "hybrid theoretical framework," which, according to him, is apparent in Wright's rejection of the psychological comfort that religious beliefs promote to transcend the absurdity of our existence.²⁷ He also asserts that the novel's protagonist –Damon– unveils the writer's atheistic discourse.²⁸ However, what we find questionable is Shelby's avowal that Wright's 1953 novel is much more a critique of the existential doctrine.²⁹ A view that the present study intends to verify.

When moving to the McCarthyian scholarship, one notices a plethora of criticism, some about his stylistic choices, others dealing with thematic diversity, and others exploring his philosophy in fiction. Bell, M. Varen, the famous critic in the field, first linked Cormac McCarthy's name to Nihilism. This view opened the gates for many late critics to examine McCarthy's nihilistic inclination across the novels he published. However, Edwin T. Arnold opposes this stream of thought, claiming that even amid the darkness, the possibility of redemption can never be denied. As far as Suttree is concerned, John Rothfork invites us on a free trip to see the mystic side of McCarthy in his Tennessee novel. He explores the religious images

²⁶Tommie Shelby, "Freedom in A Godless and Unhappy World: Wright as Outsider," in *The Cambridge Companion to Richard Wright*, ed. by Glenda R. Carpio (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 121.

²⁷Shelby, "Freedom in A Godless and Unhappy World," 126.

²⁸Shelby, "Freedom in A Godless and Unhappy World," 128.

²⁹Shelby, "Freedom in A Godless and Unhappy World," 135.

in the 1979 novel, referencing McCarthy's early works, *The Orchard Keeper*, *The Outer Dark*, and *The Child of God*, aiming to disclose an assessment of his vision of the concept. On the other hand, Lydia Cooper highlights the characterization of the protagonist, Cornelius Suttree. She describes him as a poet whose educational level distinguishes him from other characters in McCarthy's fiction. She affirms that the novel is existential in nature, while she opts to analyze the concept of death or suicide from a different perspective: the anthropogenic.

In line with the above discourses, the contribution of Elijah Guerra to this field of research is undeniable. Her innovative views are further explored in the current study. In *Sot's Skull Subsiding, Sweet Nothingness Betide Me": Suttree and Sartrean Bad Faith*, she admits the adaptation of the Sartrean Bad Faith by McCarthy in *Suttree*.³⁰ Since this idea is discussed in an article, Guerra has missed many details in her analysis which are further explored in the first chapter of this thesis. Because what has been written about McCarthy's Existentialism is either associated with Kierkegaard's or Nietzsche's philosophy, Guerra stood in opposition to the tide, confessing Sartre's influence on McCarthy's fourth novel. Unfortunately, no other research has been published on her part to further examine similar philosophical notions in the novel. A gap that the present research seeks to replenish via a detailed examination of different concepts from Sartre's discourse in both *Suttree* and *The Road*.

In 2019, Guerra published another article that revealed a shift in her interest to the Camusian doctrine. "*Nothingness is Not a Curse*": *Suttree's Absurd Revolt* is a projection of

³⁰Elijah Guerra, "Sot's Skull Subsiding, Sweet Nothingness Betide Me": *Suttree* and Sartrean Bad Faith," *Humanities* 6, no. 38 (2017): 2, doi:10.3390/h6020038

Camus's conceptualization of the notion of revolt in McCarthy's novel.³¹ She aims to establish a link between Camus's Absurdism and McCarthy's philosophical stance in *Suttree*. The generalization of her findings on the other novels is what encourages us to take her argument as a starting point of this study, which suggests a deeper examination of the Camusian discourse along with the Sartrean not solely in *Suttree*, but even in *The Road*.

On the other hand, Ashley Kunsu, Samuel Tascón Olmedo, Matthew Mullins, and Kollin Susan have categorized *The Road* as a post-apocalyptic science fiction narrative. The reading they suggested varied between those who focused on analyzing the setting, like Kollin. While Mullins investigates the relationship between both modernity and hunger in the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel. Olmedo, for his part, has chosen to examine McCarthy's redefinition of the concept of space in a dystopian post-apocalyptic environment. Besides, Kunsu considers *The Road* "a linguistic journey toward redemption"³² that lays the groundwork for a 'New Eden'.³³ Moreover, she claims that an optimistic tone is attributed to the work through language which leads to the realization of the hope for redemption.³⁴

Understanding Cormac McCarthy, written by Steven Frye, offers innovative insights into McCarthy's novels since it covers almost all of his fiction. Frye has dealt with the issue of spirituality in *The Road*. He posits himself in opposition to those who promote the atheistic mode in the work by acknowledging the dominance of Existential Christianity that aligns with the

³¹ Elijah Guerra, "Nothingness is Not a Curse" *Suttree's Absurd Revolt*," *The Cormac McCarthy Journal* 17, no. 2 (2019):149, doi: 10.5325/Cormmccaj.17.2.0148

³² Ashley Kunsu, "Maps of the World in Its Becoming": Post-Apocalyptic Naming in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*," *Journal of Modern Literature* 33, no. 1 (2009): 59.

³³ Ashley Kunsu, "Maps of the World in Its Becoming," 59.

³⁴ Kunsu, "Maps of the World in Its Becoming," 59.

views of scholars like Kierkegaard.³⁵ In a like manner, Christina Bieber Lake's *Christ Haunted: Theology on The Road* pleads for the view that the "novel's beauty is not best explained by an effort on McCarthy's part to replace God's authority with beautiful prose. Instead, like the book of Job itself, the novel must be beautiful to the extent that it is answerable to the goodness of human persons as made in the image of God."³⁶ Conversely, Josephs Allen in 2013 published an article arguing for the death of God in the post-apocalyptic novel of McCarthy by going through several allusions in the narrative to support his argument. Josephs believes that the novel is an externalization of McCarthy's "negative ponderation on God."³⁷ Equally, Michael Keren advocates the same perspective, declaring McCarthy's adoption of the atheistic stance in *The Road*. He concludes that it is man who attributes meaning to his reality which can never be indifferent to his projects.³⁸ Schaub Thomas, however, has approached this controversial matter by attempting to examine what he refers to as 'the secular scripture' in the novel.³⁹

Lydia Cooper focuses on demonstrating the link between heroism and the seemingly prophetic tale. She claims that McCarthy's protagonist –the father- is a hero who creates an ethico-religious faith in a post-apocalyptic world.⁴⁰ Alternatively, Laguarda Bueno Carmen proposes a combined perspective of trauma theory and Camusian Absurdism to decipher the enigma of *The Road*. The latter is perceived within the broader response to the 9/11 attacks.

³⁵ Steven Frye, *Understanding Cormac McCarthy* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2009), 178.

³⁶ Christina Bieber Lake, "Christ Haunted: Theology on *The Road*," *European Journal of American Studies* 12, no. 3 Special Issue: Cormac McCarthy Between Worlds (2017): 2.

³⁷ Josephs Allen, "The Quest for God in *The Road*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Cormac McCarthy*, ed. by Steven Frye (Bakersfield: California State University, 2013), 135.

³⁸ Michael Keren, "Absurdity and Revolt in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*," *PhaenEx* 7, no. 1 (spring/summer 2012): 233, doi:10.22329/p.v7i1.3339

³⁹ Thomas H. Schaub, "Secular Scripture and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*," *Renascence: Essays on Values in Literature* 61, no. 3(Spring 2009): 153.

⁴⁰ Lydia Cooper, *No More Heroes: Narrative Perspective and Morality in Cormac McCarthy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 2011), 8.

Laguarta Bueno suggests that the “novel’s strength lies in both the portrayal of the emotional consequences of a collective trauma and the existentialist message that it conveys in the face of devastation.”⁴¹ Lastly, McCarthy’s minimalist style has attracted many academics; in this regard, Lindsey Banco assumes that the adopted style best fits with the novel’s general mode of lack and absence.⁴²

In opposition to all the reviewed literature, this thesis is a full-length study that is based on an intersectional perspective: Absurdism and Existentialism. This theoretical framework equips us with the necessary tools to understand and interpret the different reactions of the self when realizing the absurdity of our world, which both McCarthy and Wright have exposed in their fiction. It, therefore, reveals what ways both novelists propose to face this absurdity. This, eventually, leads to the disclosure of the ways Wright and McCarthy advocate the reincarnation of the self amidst the chaos of the age. This angle was not a topic of investigation before in the selected corpus.

The choice of common concepts from Sartre’s philosophy and Camus’ doctrine shapes the method of analyzing the corpus, as it specifies the themes to be highlighted as well. So, dealing with notions like estrangement, freedom of choice, death, and revolt, in addition to the examination of the concept of God’s death through narrative techniques, bridges the chasm left by the abovementioned critics. This contribution would undoubtedly enrich the research field by

⁴¹ Carmen Laguarta Bueno, “Trauma and Existentialism in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*,” *Nordic Journal of English Studies* 18 no. 1 (2019):72-94.

⁴² Lindsey Banco, "Contractions in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*," *The Explicator* (2010): 276.

merging Absurdism and Existentialism to offer a different insight into the works of the Southern American writers: Wright and McCarthy.

The thesis aims to meet two main objectives as it intends to answer four central questions. Since it is a comparative study, its primary goal is to demonstrate the affinities along with the differences in the appropriation of the Sartrean-Camusian discourse by Wright and McCarthy in their *Native Son*, *The Outsider*, *Suttree*, and *The Road*. Upon realizing such an aim, the second is to demonstrate that both novelists share the same philosophical inclination and their works reveal their success in adapting the French philosophy to the American novel.

The achievement of these objectives can never be attained without answering the major research questions. Initially, the thesis's main question is: How can the intersectionality of the Absurd and Existentialism lead to the reincarnation of the self in the fiction of Wright and McCarthy? The answer to such a problematic lies in resolving the following questions. First, how do the Southern writers face the absurd? Second, does Wright's appropriation of the Sartrean-Camusian discourse differ from McCarthy's? In other words, is there a common ground between the two writers in their adaptation of the discourse? Third, how do McCarthy and Wright reveal the reincarnation of the self? Finally, what does the novel say about the philosophy of its writer?

The significance of the present thesis lies in its reliance on an intersectional perspective that combines Absurdism and Existentialism in one work. It offers a different insight into McCarthy's and Wright's selected texts thanks to its theoretical stance and the method of analyzing the works. Since most of what has been written in this research area superficially tackles some of the chosen concepts, no one has conducted a study bringing together the four novels of Wright and McCarthy.

The theoretical framework that shapes this study derives from the French school of Existentialism. Particularly, this research combines or makes use of common concepts that are introduced by Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre. Thus, reference to the theoretical background is significant before moving to the textual analysis of the selected corpus.

The atrocities of the Second World War have profoundly influenced individuals' perceptions of life. A reality that has generated feelings of estrangement and a sense of disillusionment that compel man to question everything around him, even his own position in the world. Literature written during this period captures this emotional fragmentation and discloses the absurdity of the age. Works like Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*, Camus' *The Stranger*, Wright's *Native Son*, Sartre's *Nausea*, and *No Exit*, even the works published in the post-war era, to name but few: Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, O'Connor's *Wise Blood*, Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* expose the lack of an inherent meaning in life, the haunting emotions of anxiety and dread, and the absurdity of existence in Godless universe.

The living reality consolidates the claim that World War II was the wood that fed the flames of the existential discourse. It is the chaos that characterizes life during the war, the mayhem and the horror of the post-war era, with its repercussions on France, that have induced figures like Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre to stand on the threshold of philosophy to elaborate on the rising issues of the age. Therefore, Existentialism is the umbrella term that encompasses different streams of thought that have made all attempts to come up with one precise definition in vain. This is due to the fact that every scholar in the field has his own existential stance. However, the common grounds for most existentialists are the quest for

meaning in life and the absurdity of human existence. In this matter, diverse suggestions came to the forefront as those proposed by Sartre and Camus.

The absurdist perspective is ascribed to Albert Camus, who ironically rejected being labeled an existential scholar since he considered his productions as not fully-fledged philosophy if compared with the works of Sartre or even the Christian existentialists like Kierkegaard and others. In his sight, *The Rebel*, and *The Myth of Sisyphus* in addition to the fictional works, are merely an elucidation of his perception of human existence. The absurd for Camus is a vision, binoculars through which he sees and then perceives the world. Hence, he considered himself an absurdist, not an existentialist. Due to the existence of diverse affinities that bring the absurdist and the existential doctrines into the same pot, critics generally associate Camus with Existentialism. This never denies the presence of some differences between his perspective and the one advocated by Sartre, still regarded as a derivative of the main school of thought: Existentialism. Therefore, the current study attempts to combine the two perspectives, relying on shared concepts such as alienation or estrangement, rejection of suicide, freedom of choice, revolt, in addition to atheism or the death of God.

The Camusian discourse is centered on the conceptualization of the absurd as a constant confrontation between human desire for reason and clarity and the “unreasonable silence of the world.”⁴³ Such an understanding refutes the perception of the concept as being solely related to the human mind with no regard to the external world. This suggests that the failure of the mind to find order and meaning to the chaos of a silent world, which does nothing more than raise more queries, eventually anchors it at the threshold of anxiety. This state is what Camus terms the

⁴³ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. Justin O’Brien (New York: Random House, 1955), 20.

absurd. It is, therefore, born out of the confrontation between the mind and the world because the incompatibility between the two is what gives rise to it. Such an existential dilemma makes man at the mercy of the mind that chooses either surrender in the form of suicide or resistance that appears in what is termed revolt. On the other hand, ‘nausea’ is the term identified in Sartre’s philosophy which echoes the Camusian perspective⁴⁴. The former’s Existentialism confesses the absurdity of human existence as it promotes the conception that life has no meaning except the one man creates for it. In other words, man is attributed the freedom to generate the meaning he desires for his life.

Alienation, or what might also be termed the feelings of estrangement, is tackled by both scholars. On the one hand, the Camusian notion of alienation is rooted in his concept of the absurd. The latter, for Camus, as stated above, emerges out of the confrontation between the individual’s keen desire for meaning and the irrationality of the world empowered by its silence.⁴⁵ It is what Sartre describes as the “cleavage”⁴⁶ in his commentary on *The Stranger*. In fact, *The Myth of Sisyphus* draws a distinction between the feelings of the absurd and the absurd as a notion. Camus elucidates that “The climate of absurdity is in the beginning. The end is the absurd universe [...] It lays the foundations for it, and that is all. It is not limited to that notion [the absurd], except in the brief moment when it passes judgment on the universe.”⁴⁷ This leads us to associate the genesis of the sense of estrangement with the feelings of the absurd. To further elaborate on this assumption we need to go back to that part of the essay where Camus discusses man’s relationship to the natural world, the absurd notion, and the feelings of the absurd stating

⁴⁴ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 11.

⁴⁵ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 20.

⁴⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism Is Humanism*, trans. Carol Macomber, ed. John Kulka (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 74.

⁴⁷ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 9-20.

“If I were a tree among trees, a cat among animals, this life would have a meaning, or rather this problem would not arise, for I should belong to this world. I should *be* this world to which I am now opposed by my whole consciousness and my whole insistence upon familiarity. This ridiculous reason is what sets me in opposition to all creation.”⁴⁸ He, therefore, explains the way the feelings of absurdity have led man to realize his unlikeness to the natural world, which he judges to be absurd, and, in turn, ends with his estrangement from that same world which he is a part of. Hence, for Camus, the ‘climate of the absurd’ not only lays bare the absurd to man but generates his sense of alienation from the external environment as well.

Alienation has, thus, brought into existence an alien being whom Camus calls the stranger in his 1942 novel. This stranger not only alienates himself from his surroundings but also from the Other with whom he shares the world. This withdrawal from the Other, as exposed in *The Stranger*, from the community, is the outcome of the feelings of alienation generated out of the realization of our unlikeness to the Other. Better put, Meursault distances himself from the social atmosphere due to his awareness of the absurdity of the dominant social codes. Consequently, the community rejects such an individual not only because he is considered an outsider to the social system, but his presence is a serious threat to their morals and ethics. And here lies the essence of the absurd conflict between the self and the community.

Self-estrangement is also another form of alienation that is central in the Camusian discourse. Its significance resides in revealing the way reason drives the person to be estranged even from himself. This form is interpreted by Sartre as an alienation of “natural man in relation

⁴⁸ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 34.

to mind.”⁴⁹ It is the outcome of the confrontation between the self and the mind. These feelings of discomfort haunt the individual and inaugurate him a stranger to himself when he, eventually, confronts his inhumanity.⁵⁰ In other words, it initially starts with man’s weariness of the mechanical aspects of life and the horror that seizes him at the realization of his true enemy: the future. This future that he should reject, since it stands for hope, which is futile.⁵¹ And then comes that lucid moment when one realizes that even humans “secrete the inhuman”⁵² in terms of their meaningless gestures, which are as mechanical as life and as absurd as life is. Hence, man finds himself a “stranger who at certain seconds comes to meet us in a mirror, [...] we encounter in our photographs.”⁵³ All in all, the feelings of the absurd set the foundation for the absurd notion, and then both procreate an alien being who estranges himself not only from his meaningless world but even from his beloved people and from himself as well.

On the other hand, the concept of alienation is central in the Sartrean discourse to which he devotes a large space, especially in his *Notebooks for an Ethics* and *Being and Nothingness*. After an extensive reading through his works, we come to conclude that Sartre and Camus share the fundamentals of the concept. The definition that Sartre suggests for alienation is the same as exposed a few lines above when exploring the Camusian perspective of the concept. Accordingly, he assumes that alienation, in his sight, basically refers to “a certain type of relations that man has with himself, with others, and with the world.”⁵⁴ In another vein, Sartre’s doctrine delves deeper into the concept due to the fact that he was more interested in philosophy and phenomenology

⁴⁹ Sartre, *Existentialism Is Humanism*, 77.

⁵⁰ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 11.

⁵¹ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 11.

⁵² Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 11

⁵³ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 11

⁵⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Notebooks for an Ethics*, trans. David Pellauer (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1983), 382

than Camus. This is what justifies the dominance of Sartre's perspective in the first chapter of the research.

The self is a significant notion in the attempts to define or explore the relation of man to himself. Sartre's ontological study classifies being into two poles: being-in-itself and being-for-itself. The first mode of being, to borrow the original French term, is l'être-en-soi or what is translated as being-in-itself. It represents the being of things or facticity. In other words, it refers to objectivity. Sartre defines it as being, which is what it is, since "Being is in-itself. Being is what it is."⁵⁵ Therefore, being-in-itself can never be "what it is not"⁵⁶ since it is positive. Such a definition, though, seems simple; it encompasses diverse complex details. Starting first with 'being is in-itself' which is used to indicate that 'Being' is perceived as 'being-in-itself', so being-in-itself is in-itself. In this regard, Sartre attempts to claim that this mode of being has no reason because if it had a cause, it would simply be 'in-its-reason', not 'in-itself.' To clarify, it is that mode of being that is self-contained: a perspective that derives from the scholar's atheism. This is to say, the existence of being-in-itself refutes the existence of God. To put it another way, he advocates the death of God, which, in turn, suggests that God is not the One who created being-in-itself, but it was not created or caused. However, one should not think that being-in-itself had produced itself, but it just exists. Sartre himself suggests that we should not bother ourselves in seeking an answer to such a question because human reason fails to offer a convincing explanation. Moving to the second part of the definition, when he avers that 'Being is what it is'

⁵⁵ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay in Phenomenological Ontology*, Trans. Hazel Barnes (New York, New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), lxvi.

⁵⁶ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, lxvi.

and not what it is not, this refers to the claim that being-in-itself is not negative because “it is full of positivity”⁵⁷ and is unchangeable since it is not associated with temporality.

The second mode of Being is *l'être-pour-soi*, or what is known as being-for-itself in English. It is used to describe the being of humans or persons as it applies to consciousness. Hence, the latter is used interchangeably with being-for-itself. Sartre defines this mode as “a being which is not what it is and which is what it is not.”⁵⁸ These words make it clear that it is the opposite of being-in-itself. The definition implies that being-for-itself or consciousness is negative, i.e., it is the negation of itself. Sartre suggests that man is “the being who is his own nothingness and by whom nothingness comes into the world,”⁵⁹ and it is the one who nihilates the being-in-itself. To clarify, the thing that needs to be highlighted here is that these two modes of Being constitute the duality of human existence. In other words, the human being is a thing and a conscious being at the same time. In this regard, being-for-itself depends in its existence on being-in-itself, which means that human existence is not a total contingent, though he confesses that being-for-itself is absurd just like the in-itself because they just exist with no clear cause. The contingency that Sartre talks about appears as ‘facticity’ in his works, which stands for everything external imposed on consciousness, such as race, social class, skin color, even his birth This idea constitutes the core of Sartre’s discourse. He assumes that man is thrown into an absurd existence and his abandonment is a fact, hence he is absolutely free to choose what to be; to create essence to his existence since existence precedes essence. Therefore, the choice to be and create oneself is a nihilation of the in-itself.

⁵⁷ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, lxvi.

⁵⁸ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 268.

⁵⁹ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 45.

After elaborating on the key notions necessary to understand Sartre's discourse, we come to state his perception of the self that paves the way for the move to self-alienation, since the notion of the self is interrelated with self-alienation. Firstly, the self is undoubtedly related to the subject as it reflects the bond between the subject and himself.⁶⁰ Correspondingly, it is associated with being-for-itself, which means that it is wholly related to consciousness, not the other mode of being, i.e., the in-itself. In fact, Sartre did not provide us with a clear and direct definition of the self as one might imagine, but throughout his *The Transcendence of the Ego* and *Being and Nothingness*, he attempts to elucidate the different elements or the factors that constitute his perception of the self. It appears to be coupled with the pre-reflective consciousness. First of all, associating the self with consciousness suggests that it can never be a substance because that would unite it with being-in-itself, which is an inert as summed up by Churchill and Reynolds in their analysis of Sartre's key concepts⁶¹. This leads us to refer to his most revolutionary claim in the field of self theories, which reveals that consciousness is primarily defined as consciousness about something, and it has to include self-consciousness that is differentiated from reflection. To quote Sartre, "a consciousness has no need of a reflective consciousness in order to be conscious of itself."⁶² This suggests that consciousness is conscious of itself and is transparent to itself without the need for other consciousness.⁶³ Within the Sartrean discourse, self-consciousness is perceived as a "non-positional consciousness that is pre-reflective,"⁶⁴ an assumption which is elucidated with the example of the act of counting cigarettes. In this regard, Sartre assumes that the act of counting cigarettes has a sense just in case one is completely aware of one's

⁶⁰ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 76.

⁶¹ Steven Churchill and Jack Reynolds, "ed.", *Jean-Paul Sartre's key concepts* (Routledge: New York, 2013), 33.

⁶² Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Transcendence of the Ego: A Sketch for a Phenomenological Description*, trans. A. Brown (London: Routledge, 2004), 11.

⁶³ Churchill and Reynolds, *Jean-Paul Sartre's key concepts*, 36.

⁶⁴ Churchill and Reynolds, *Jean-Paul Sartre's key concepts*, 37.

consciousness of every single cigarette, and then that will make one conscious of how many of them he found.⁶⁵ Accordingly, Miller interprets this insight, suggesting that Sartre intends to claim that in the pre-reflective experience, there is no reference to the self, the agent, which means that it is impersonal.⁶⁶ Conversely, by the end, Sartre contradicts his early views to confess the “need to introduce into his ontology a pre-reflective “place holder” for the “I”: his famed notion of nothingness,”⁶⁷ to borrow the concluding words from Miller’s *Husserl and Sartre on the Self*. Eventually, the self, the ‘I’, finds its echoes in the pre-reflective experience.

The Sartrean scholarship knows a paucity of critical works that offer a commentary on the concept of alienation. To start with, his *Being and Nothingness* consists of two different concepts that scholars associate with self-alienation. The first is identified in the chapter where Sartre has dealt with bad faith, which reveals a great deal with the notion of estrangement from oneself. Initially, bad faith is perceived as “a lie to oneself,”⁶⁸ but the act of lying to oneself necessitates the awareness of the truth that is being hidden. In other words, the liar, while he denies the truth in his words, he affirms it within himself.⁶⁹ So, he is the deceiver and the one being deceived at the same time. To put it another way, bad faith is basically interpreted as one form of self-deception because it implies an attempt to avoid a certain truth about oneself by “hiding a displeasing truth or presenting as truth a pleasing untruth. Bad faith then has in appearance the structure of falsehood.”⁷⁰ Talia Morag, in her book-length study *Sartre and Analytic Philosophy*, suggests an interpretation of Sartre’s ideas through the example of a separated couple. She assumes that these people link the end of their relationship with being inexperienced due to their

⁶⁵ Churchill and Reynolds, *Jean-Paul Sartre’s key concepts*, 37.

⁶⁶ Izchak Miller, “Husserl and Sartre on the Self,” *The Monist* 69, no. 4 (1986): 541 -543.

⁶⁷ Miller, “Husserl and Sartre on the Self,” 543.

⁶⁸ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 48.

⁶⁹ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 48.

⁷⁰ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 49.

younger age.⁷¹ This justification is a way of distancing oneself from his past or one's "younger version [...] as if that younger version is a person who no longer exists or has nothing to do with who they are now [...] an object to be classified"⁷² Morag argues that bad faith is a way of self-alienation because Sartre claims that man is both a thing or a facticity and a subject, bad faith is, thus, perceived as self-objectification. This means that when being in bad faith, one tries to neglect or distance oneself from the other part of him, that object side, as well as denying his responsibility for the condition he is in, like the example of our past as proposed by Morag. In the same vein, another critic named R. Moran also believes that bad faith takes the form of self-deception arguing that it denies its motivation, in the name of the denied responsibility which one finds displeasing to undertake.⁷³ This motivation is explained by Sartre as the unawareness of the one being in bad faith of his responsibility because he is distracted. This is what is known as the notion of attention shift. In fact, Talia Morag suggests a detailed explanation of the example of the woman, used in *Being and Nothingness*, to elaborate on the concept of bad faith, in order to demonstrate the type of self-alienation Sartre alludes to through self-objectification. She believes that Sartre intends to present the way any person may fall into the trap of deceiving oneself by objectifying one's body⁷⁴. The process of objectifying the body starts first with feelings of humiliation aroused as a result of the woman's realization of being desired as a mere body: the object side of her being.⁷⁵ Therefore, she unconsciously shifts her intention to herself as a subject that she wants to be recognized and admired by her companion. This act is what is interpreted as a way of escaping an unpleasant truth through an intention shift. It is also, "during this time the

⁷¹ Talia Morag, "ed.", *Sartre and Analytic Philosophy* (Routledge: London, 2023), 190.

⁷² Morag, *Sartre and Analytic Philosophy*, 190.

⁷³ R. Moran, *Authority and Estrangement: An Essay on Self-Knowledge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 2-3.

⁷⁴ Morag, *Sartre and Analytic Philosophy*, 192.

⁷⁵ Morag, *Sartre and Analytic Philosophy*, 192.

divorce of the body from the soul is accomplished; the hand rests inert between the warm hands of her companion –neither consenting nor resisting – a thing.”⁷⁶ Therefore, by objectifying her body, she witnesses an alienation of the self from the body because she denies responsibility to choose the direction that the date may take. Accordingly, Sartre concludes that bad faith is unintentional since the person does not plan to be in bad faith, but it just happens. Though he did not use the term alienation in his discussion of bad faith, this stream of thought does not deviate from what is known as self-alienation.

The second concept, which is associated with self-alienation, is exposed in part three entitled: *Being-For-Others*. This part introduced us to another mode of being, which is being-for-Others, that is of great significance not only in the understanding of self-alienation but to the notion of freedom as well. Sartre devotes a section from this part to develop another conception of self-alienation under the title: *The Look*. He also relies on self-objectification to demonstrate his vision of this type of estrangement. It is only in this part where Sartre openly uses the word alienation to describe man’s inner state that he aims to explain. ‘The look’, essentially, means the perception of the for-itself when encountered with the Other. This means how the for-itself or an individual changes his self-perception when realizing being looked at as an object. For Sartre, the process of self-alienation starts when a for-itself first encounters another for-itself. In other words, the realization of being looked at by another being-for-itself leads to what Sartre calls “the shock”. This shock arises because of the presence of the other as the subject, whose look is merely an objectifying look. Consequently, this Other is the reason for one’s self-objectification since he limits the latter’s possibilities or freedom. Sartre also puts emphasis on the emotional impacts that the ‘I’ witnesses as a result of the look of the Other. Shame, fear, and self-hatred

⁷⁶ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 56.

haunt the for-itself and drive him to “experience a subtle alienation of all [...] possibilities.”⁷⁷ Sartre, eventually, declares the birth of what he calls “alien me”⁷⁸: the alien being who is estranged from himself and the world. Similarly, Richard Schacht, in his commentary on this point, says that man fails to detach himself from the alien being within him, which he discovers in the look of the Other.⁷⁹ Therefore, the awareness of the presence of this alien being within oneself makes all attempts to reconstruct one’s subjectivity go with the wind.⁸⁰

Sartre goes deeper in his analysis of being-for-Others to shed light on the feelings of hate. He demonstrates that perceiving the Other as a threat to one’s freedom generates dark feelings, such as hatred of all Others⁸¹. Consequently, this hatred later appears under the guise of the desire to suppress these Others, which is the solution to the enslavement imposed on the for-itself by the Others.⁸² This suggests that there should be a chasm between the two that might be perceived as a form of alienation. Such an interpretation may be valid when we consider Sartre’s conceptualization of the Other that sets the foundation for what he terms collective alienation. He shifts his attention to “the Us” as an alienated group within the larger social gatherings to direct a sharp critique of the socio-economic system⁸³. All in all, Sartre shows that confrontation with Others is what constitutes one’s self-knowledge, then ends with the estrangement of the for-itself, be it a group or an individual, from the Other.

The concept of revolt is the crux of the Camusian discourse, while the freedom of choice is essential in the Sartrean doctrine. Initially, Albert Camus creates from his alien man an absurd

⁷⁷ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 261.

⁷⁸ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 265.

⁷⁹ Richard Schacht, *Alienation* (New York: Doubleday & Company 1970), 222.

⁸⁰ Schacht, *Alienation*, 222.

⁸¹ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 411.

⁸² Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 411.

⁸³ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 421.

hero who chooses not to surrender to the absurd by falling into the trap of nihilism. He demonstrates that though his stranger is burdened by his self-alienation and is an outsider to the Others, he is free to act as he embraces the absurdity of his existence and rejects suicide. *The Myth of Sisyphus* refutes the assumption that the absurd dictates death through the archetypal hero Sisyphus, “who chooses to live; he chooses courage and reason”⁸⁴ rather than suicide and submission. Accordingly, Camus demonstrates that suicide can never be a solution to the senselessness of life since it announces us as losers in the victory. The act is a clear confession from the individual who fails to find “any profound reason for living, the insane character of that daily agitation, and the uselessness of suffering”⁸⁵ have thrown him into the threshold of voluntary death. A man opts for suicide only when he fails to understand life and seeks solace from his futile suffering. On the other hand, recovery is what Camus advocates to find happiness while embracing the absurd. The legitimate inquiry that all productions of Camus attempt to answer is: How can man be happy knowing that his life is absurd? The answer requires reference to the concept of metaphysical revolt, at first. Since Camus finds that “suicide settles the absurd”⁸⁶ rather than ends it, revolt is what makes the absurd die because “we turn away from it.”⁸⁷ This notion is defined as a challenge to the world: a mere “certainly of a crushing fate, without the resignation that ought to accompany it.”⁸⁸ So, revolt is what gives life its true color since it makes man turn away from nihilism and grant value to his days and nights amidst the absurd. It is the expression of freedom that Camus attributes to the absurd man. Here lies the true essence of ‘The Manual of Happiness’ that Camus talked about, because the absurd is inseparable

⁸⁴ Anné H. Verhoef, “Sisyphus, Happiness and Transcendence,” *South African Journal of Philosophy* 33, no. 4 (2014): 2.

⁸⁵ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 6.

⁸⁶ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 36.

⁸⁷ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 36.

⁸⁸ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 36.

from happiness.⁸⁹ In this regard, Verhoef relates Camus' conception of happiness to death. He assumes that when a man is liberated from his fear and anxiety, including the fear of death, his happiness will not be at risk.⁹⁰ This is, literally, what Sisyphus has done; he frees himself from all restraints and then challenges the Gods and the world by accepting his fate to make his victory. Revolt has made his victory, which is the meaning that he grants to his life. So, Camus concludes his essay by claiming that Sisyphus is happy.

Moving to Sartrean discourse, in *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre's discussion of freedom is in terms of the freedom of choice⁹¹. It is perceived as synonymous with consciousness: a being-for-itself which is not what it is, and it is what it is not. In other words, he declares that man does not possess freedom, but he is a freedom, and this freedom is the freedom of choice⁹². Therefore, Sartre suggests that "We shall never apprehend ourselves except as a choice in the making. But freedom is simply the fact that this choice is always unconditioned."⁹³ This leads us to conclude that consciousness, freedom, and choice have the same meaning for Sartre.

To demonstrate the link between essence and freedom of choice, we shall state the dictum, "Existence precedes essence."⁹⁴ The for-itself or consciousness, as mentioned before, has no cause for its existence and no essence. Hence, man is absolutely free to create himself anew and choose his being. In this regard, Emmanuel K. Iwuagwu suggests that freedom signifies the lack of being, and one's consciousness of his freedom allows him to choose what he desires

⁸⁹ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 77.

⁹⁰ Verhoef, "Sisyphus, Happiness and Transcendence," 3.

⁹¹ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 484.

⁹² Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 28.

⁹³ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 479.

⁹⁴ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 568.

himself to become.⁹⁵ This ability to make choices is what characterizes the for-itself and is referred to as transcendence.⁹⁶ In other words, by making choices, man is able to transcend his facticity and create his essence since life is devoid of meaning, values, laws, and even morals. Therefore, Sartre grants man absolute freedom to choose what meaning he wants for his own life without neglecting his responsibility for the choices he makes. Accordingly, man chooses to exist and turn his back on nihilism, but when death comes, it transforms the for-itself into a mere in-itself. This means that death is beyond our possibilities since it comes from the outside to accompany us to the outside.⁹⁷ Sartre considers death as a facticity, the same way birth is, not a possibility as Heidegger claims.⁹⁸ In this regard, Lightbody interprets this idea by suggesting that possibilities and choices are interrelated for Sartre, which means that if we consider death as a possibility, this would imply that we can choose when and where to die.⁹⁹ But man can never choose death; it just comes to draw an end to his project of being: essence. Correspondingly, when death comes, it limits our freedom, but man can never understand this fact because he would not be alive.¹⁰⁰ In this instance, one may wonder if death is the fact that destroys our essence, then why not commit suicide? Sartre's perception of suicide is the same as Camus's. He considers it an escapist form of life due to the absurdity of our existence¹⁰¹. He defines it as a choice: an expression of one's failure to see other possibilities in life.¹⁰² He even goes further to

⁹⁵ Emmanuel K. Iwuagwu, "Death as a Limitation to Human Freedom: A Critical Look at Jean-Paul Sartre's Existential Position on Freedom and Death," *The International Journal of Humanities and Social Studies* 7 no. 8 (2019): 354.

⁹⁶ Brian Lightbody, "Death and Liberation: A Critical Investigation of Death in Sartre's Being and Nothingness," *Minerva- An Internet Journal of Philosophy* 13 (2009): 88.

⁹⁷ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 545.

⁹⁸ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 545.

⁹⁹ Lightbody, "Death and Liberation," 90.

¹⁰⁰ Iwuagwu, "Death as a Limitation to Human Freedom," 358.

¹⁰¹ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 540.

¹⁰² Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 540.

consider it as an act of cowardice that “causes [my] life to be submerged in the absurd”.¹⁰³ Therefore, suicide never ends the absurd, but it just reveals one’s nihilist view of life and his inability to fight for existence by seeking other possibilities rather than making an end to one’s life.

Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre are classified by critics as atheistic existential scholars. Their literary and philosophical works reveal their disregard for everything sacred. They promote the death of God and deny His authority over man. Sartre believes that man is abandoned in a Godless universe, so everything is lawful. For him, the presence of God and the freedom of man can never coexist. This takes us back to the idea that existence comes first, then it is man who will choose his being, but if God exists, then it would be “essence precedes existence”¹⁰⁴; it is God Who creates man and chooses man’s fate. Hence, one would never talk of human freedom because everything is pre-conditioned. He claims that every individual is free, and this freedom allows him to make his laws and values because God is dead. The notion of responsibility includes the Other in the act of creation of these values and the choices he has made.¹⁰⁵ In other words, the death of God grants man the absolute freedom to make choices for himself and Others. Eventually, man becomes the creator of himself and the inventor of laws for himself and the Other in order to give meaning to life. Sartre, simply, demonstrates man’s desire to be God on earth.¹⁰⁶ On the other hand, Camus also assumes that the freedom of man and the existence of God can in no way coexist. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, he declares that the presence of God annihilates human freedom because there cannot be a third way; either man is free or guided

¹⁰³ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 540.

¹⁰⁴ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 469.

¹⁰⁵ Iwuagwu, “Death as a Limitation to Human Freedom,” 355.

¹⁰⁶ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 566.

by a master.¹⁰⁷ He divulges his absurd man a hero who chooses to live in a godless world and be “God’s assassin.”¹⁰⁸ Therefore, Kamber suggests the death of God announces the absurd hero as the master of his own life which is the essence of his true happiness.¹⁰⁹ Additionally, Camus finds that Christian existentialists like Kierkegaard have deviated from the absurd to escape to religion and God to seek answers to the irrationality of the world. This leap of faith is what he considers a philosophical suicide. It is a form of suicide since it eliminates reason; the death of the mind which inevitably announces the death of the self. Correspondingly, it is the mind or reason that reveals the incomprehensibility of our world and proves the factuality of the death of God. Lastly, both Camus and Sartre declare the death of God, and we are His murderers. This perspective is also advocated by David Sprintzen, who assumes that what binds Camus’ and Sartre’s views is the shared perception “on the crises of European civilization”¹¹⁰ and the urgent need to highlight the meaning of life in an age where God is dead.¹¹¹

In conclusion, Camus advocates revolt as a solution to the absurd; an act that gives, so to speak, a sort of meaning to life. Nevertheless, he believes that finding real meaning in life is absurd. His absurd hero is a free man who has dropped nihilism aside and chooses to live in a godless universe and revolt against the whole world while being aware of the absurdity of his act. This is what constitutes the essence of his doctrine. On the other hand, Sartre claims that man is the maker of himself and the meaning of his life since God is dead. To put it another way, meaning for him can be attained. However, our task in this research is not to argue whether we

¹⁰⁷ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 69.

¹⁰⁸ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 70.

¹⁰⁹ Kamber Richard, *On Camus* (New York: Wadworth, 2002), 62.

¹¹⁰ David Sprintzen, “Sartre and Camus: a Much-Misunderstood Relationship,” in *Brill’s Companion to Camus: Camus among the Philosophers*, ed. Matthew Sharpe, Maciej Kaluza and Peter Francev (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2020), 256.

¹¹¹ Sprintzen, “Sartre and Camus: a Much-Misunderstood Relationship,” 256.

can create or even find true meaning in life, but to explore, on the one hand, man's different reactions to the meaninglessness of our existence. On the other hand, to demonstrate how Wright and McCarthy choose to face the absurd. The concepts stated above that both Camus and Sartre offer are the selected notions that allow us to explain human actions and interpret man's contradictory behaviors when confronted with the absurd in a universe known for its meaninglessness. It also lays the ground for us to examine the way Wright and McCarthy choose to fight the absurd in order to reveal the reincarnation of the self.

The thesis is divided into three main analytical chapters. The first is entitled "The Alien Being and the Absurd Conflict between the Self and Community in Richard Wright's and Cormac McCarthy's Selected Novels," which examines the concept of alienation in *Native Son* and *The Outsider* of Wright, *Suttree*, and *The Road* of McCarthy. It is, thus, an attempt to demonstrate the extent to which McCarthy and Wright succeeded in their appropriation or Americanization of the concept. It also aims to disclose the absurd conflict between self-alienation and communal alienation that has led to the creation of an alternative space by the strangers, the main characters, when faced with the absurd. In other words, it discusses the first reaction that the Southern writers reveal when man first becomes conscious of the meaninglessness of his existence. This chapter is, however, divided into three main parts. The first tackles self-alienation, while the second is left for communal estrangement. The last part divulges the characters' escapism into another space where the sense of self is manifested.

"Between Suicide, Freedom of Choice and Revolt Paradigms: The Rebirth of the Free Self in the Novels of Wright and McCarthy" is the title of the second chapter which explores the way the Wrightian-McCarthyian characters react to the absurdity of their life or how the absurd is

first perceived and then influences their reaction. In other words, emphasis is put on tracing the link between the death of the self and the rebirth of a new rebellious self within oneself and within others which raises the challenge to defeat the absurd by asserting its freedom of choice and rebelling against its reality. So, the primary goal of this part of the research is to demonstrate the way the death of the mind and the self may generate the reincarnation of other selves who fight to impose their own laws on the world as a whole. For the purpose at hand, the chapter is divided into two parts. The first, which is under the title: “Suicide: A Paradise in Disguise in Wright’s and McCarthy’s Novels,” examines the escapist reaction in *Native Son*, *The Outsider*, *Suttree*, and *The Road*. On the other hand, the second part is put under the heading: “Challenging the Absurd in Richard Wright’s and Cormac McCarthy’s novels”. It explores the transition from submission to revolt and the freedom of choice as a result of the transcendence of fear of death and the realization that suffering is part of the game of existence, since it gives life its own value.

In the same vein, the last chapter is divided into two main parts, and each consists of two sections. The first part is devoted to Wright’s *Native Son* and *The Outsider*. Moreover, its first section takes the oath to elaborate on the Wrightian perception of the concept of faith in more general terms, while the second delves into a more detailed analysis of the literary techniques present in both novels in an attempt to demonstrate the death of God which consequently declares the reincarnation of the self in Wright’s absurd world. On the other hand, the second part of the current chapter deals with *The Road* and *Suttree* of Cormac McCarthy. Its opening section revolves essentially around discussing the writer’s perception of the issue of religion, which inevitably influences his convictions about the death of God that defines man’s faith in the present era. It also contextualizes McCarthy’s works and considers the derivation of his thought. The second section relies on the examination of the literary techniques employed by McCarthy to

demonstrate his negative attitudes about the issue of religion- in other words, the death of God-man's abandonment in the universe and its intersectionality with the reincarnation of the self in the above-mentioned novels.

CHAPTER ONE:

**THE ALIEN BEING AND THE ABSURD CONFLICT BETWEEN THE SELF AND
COMMUNITY IN RICHARD WRIGHT'S AND CORMAC MCCARTHY'S SELECTED
NOVELS**

This chapter accounts for Cormac McCarthy's and Richard Wright's appropriation of Jean-Paul Sartre's and Albert Camus' notion of alienation into their fiction. It also aims to explore the first reaction of the self to the absurdity of life. The absurd conflict between the self, community, and the alternative space created by the stranger when faced with the absurd is the main interest of this part of the dissertation. Moreover, it offers a close reading of Wright's *The Outsider* and *Native Son* in addition to McCarthy's *Suttree* and *The Road* to uncover the echoes of that type of Existentialism proposed by Camus and Sartre in the works at hand.

I. A Stranger to Oneself: Richard Wright's and Cormac McCarthy's Perception of Self-alienation

1. Thomas Bigger's Pursuit of an Authentic Self in Richard Wright's *Native Son*

Native Son exposes the way Thomas Bigger struggles to understand the dynamics of his absurd world and the desire to construct an authentic self in the Black Belt- Chicago's South Side¹¹². Bigger is an outsider who possesses a haunted self that is weakened by fear, dread, racism, and hatred. The first encounter with Bigger reveals a serious awareness of his blackness. In other words, this awareness of the ugliness of his skin color and appearance is what estranges him from himself and determines not only his knowledge about his self but the world's perception as well. This perception is clear in Bigger's following declaration "We black and they white. They got things and we ain't. They do things and we can't. It is just like living in jail"¹¹³. In more technical terms, Sartre, in his concept of the Other, believes that this "ugliness" of the blacks is the mirror reflection of true human nature. He presupposes that awareness is the first

¹¹² Aime J. Ellis, "Boys in the Hood" Black Male Community in Richard Wright's *Native Son*," *The Johns Hopkins University Press* 29, no. 1(Winter 2006): 182.

¹¹³ Richard Wright, *Native Son* (New York: New York; Harper Collins e-books, 2009), 28.

step in the process of creating an authentic self and overcoming self-estrangement. This means that the blacks, as a marginal group, realize the fact that there exist certain factors that differentiate them from the rest. This awareness is primarily due to the presence of the Other and his objectifying look ¹¹⁴ that, eventually, generates the feeling of estrangement from oneself. Bigger in Wright's novel is the embodiment of this view.

Thomas Bigger's awareness of his ugliness shakes his inner stability. His realization of being different in the eyes of the other race makes him fall into the trap of self-estrangement. As a consequence, enduring the pain of not being able to define oneself and identify one's place in the world is Bigger's greatest challenge. His consciousness is unable to strike a balance between the assertive and the submissive selves generated by his absurd reality¹¹⁵. The former comes to prominence when Bigger is among his people; the fight with his friend Gears best illustrates it. While the latter is dominant when he faces the whites. In other words, Bigger turns out to be submissive when having a direct interaction with the other race because the presence of the white makes him feel his ugliness, or simply leads him to hate himself. In his first meeting with Mr. Dalton, the narrator describes Bigger's feelings as follows: "He hated himself at that moment. Why was he acting and feeling this way?"¹¹⁶ Hence, self-hatred, which is the product of the received emotions generated by the whites' attitudes toward Bigger, is an expression of self-estrangement, Wright highlights in the novel. Additionally, emphasis is put on the fact that such feelings are sometimes deceiving since they influence the character's perception of the Others' behaviors. Correspondingly, when Bigger is treated as an equal human being by Jan, the communist sympathizer, and Mary, the Daltons' heiress, he feels hate and shame instead of

¹¹⁴Stuart Zane Charme, "Sartre's Images of the Other and the Search for Authenticity," *Human Studies* 14 (1991): 552.

¹¹⁵Masaya Takeuchi, "Bigger's Divided Self: Violence and Homosociality in 'Native Son,'" *Studies in American Naturalism* 4, no. 1 (Summer 2009): 56-57.

¹¹⁶Wright, *Native Son*, 50.

satisfaction since he thinks that they are making fun of him. Consequently, the reversed emotions that Bigger witnesses are the creation of the stereotypical images engraved in his consciousness. His racist community makes him believe that the whites are not ordinary humans like him, but “a kind of very strong natural power,”¹¹⁷ as Lingdi Chen suggests. This confirms the view that the presence of the Other with his objectifying gaze estranges the person from himself, regardless of the attitudes of this Other. Thus, man becomes aware of the fact that he is a subject and an object at the same time, which is a form of twoness that Wright reveals even in linguistic terms.

Richard Wright’s novel is characterized by the use of two linguistic registers¹¹⁸. In other words, it offers a *mélange* of the formal and the vernacular language which alludes to the divided self of the stranger. Therefore, Bigger alternates between his black vernacular when addressing his people and the standard language spoken by the whites when addressing them¹¹⁹. Initially, Bigger’s black language dominates his interpersonal speech when being in the Black Belt with the Blacks as we can see in the following discussion: “Jack, I betcha two bites you can’t make it!” [...] “Ain’t none of us got more guts’n Gus” G.H. said. [...] “Ah shut you trap,” Bigger said”¹²⁰. These words give us an insight into the colloquial tongue and non-standard grammar that we often encounter in Black American English. For instance, the use of the contraction “betcha” instead of “bet you” and “Ah shut you trap” instead of “shut your mouth” which are a sign of colloquialism in addition to the form of the verb “Ain’t” instead of “are not” or “aren’t” that stands for the presence of dialect in the discussion. Whereas, the non-standard language can be identified in “got more guts’n Gus” while in the standard form, we would rather say “got more

¹¹⁷ Lingdi Chen, “An Analysis of the Changing of Bigger Thomas’ Behavior and Thought in *Native Son*,” *Theory and Practice in Language Studies* 1, no. 12 (December 2011): 1858, doi: 10.4304/tpls.1.12.1857-1860

¹¹⁸ Mohammed Ritchane, “The Vernacular Language in Richard Wright’s *Native Son* as a Device to Dramatize W.E.B. Du Bois’ Double-Consciousness,” *International Journal of Novel Research in Humanity and Social Sciences* 6, no. 2 (March - April 2019): 13.

¹¹⁹ Ritchane, “The Vernacular Language in Richard Wright’s *Native Son*,” 14.

¹²⁰ Wright, *Native Son*, 41.

courageous than Gus”. However, he shifts to the official language when conversing with the other race and his discussion with Mr. Dalton during the visit to his house best illustrates this view. Mr. Dalton says “What kind of buildings is that over there?” “You mean where I live, suh?” “yes.” “Oh, it’s just an old building.” “Where do you pay rents?” “Down on Thirty-first Street”¹²¹. This reveals the difference in the register used by Bigger if compared with the previous example with his black friend. Therefore, the standard grammar, in addition to the use of formal English vocabulary, proves the change of the linguistic register when addressing the other race. Thus, this constructed image of the stranger with two opposing registers alludes to Bigger’s divided self or “The doubleness of the character”¹²² –to use Ritchane’s expression- which is linguistically represented. Eventually, the contact that Bigger has with the whites opens his eyes to the necessity of attaining an authentic self and rejecting the invisibility imposed on him: culturally, linguistically, and physically.

The main obstacle standing between Bigger and his authentic self is his obsession with the whites’ gaze which profoundly affects his sense of self. Richard Wright, as a black writer who has gone through the same experience as his protagonist, perfectly pictures the Blacks’ concern about their image in the whites’ eyes. Moreover, through Bigger Wright elucidates the way the Other’s look of hatred shakes the Blacks’ perception of their selves¹²³. Similarly, Bigger’s visit to the Daltons’ house is a good illustration of his concern about the whites’ gaze as he attempts to give the impression “that he was not as stupid as he might appear. He felt a need to speak more, for he felt that maybe Mr. Dalton expected it [...] He lifted his eyes and saw Mr. Dalton watching

¹²¹ Wright, *Native Son*, 51.

¹²² Ritchane, “The Vernacular Language in Richard Wright’s *Native Son*,” 14.

¹²³ Lamia Boukerrou and Mohammed Seghir Halimi, “Double Consciousness in African-American literature Case study: Richard Wright’s Novel *Native Son*,” *Ichkalat journal* 10, no. 2 (Jun 2021): 1133.

him closely. He dropped his eyes again”¹²⁴. Additionally, this obsession with the whites’ gaze drives him to the accidental murder of Mary, his employer’s daughter. The fear of being caught in Mary’s room by Mrs. Dalton pushes him to silence the Daltons’ heiress with a pillow, which results in her death. Similarly, this fear, which leads him to murder, also generates feelings of shame because of his skin color. Correspondingly, while Bigger was with Mary and Jan, his eyes were always gazing at his hand to never forget the difference between himself and his companions. He even prefers to bear the pain while sharing the same car seat and not make them look at his ugly hand. This shame, according to Sartre, is due to “the mere appearance of the Other, I am put in the position of passing judgment on myself as on an object, for it is as an object that I appear to the Other.”¹²⁵ In other words, the person’s awareness of being considered as an object by the Other generates feelings of shame. Therefore, Bigger is ashamed of his blackness because he is accustomed to maltreatment from the whites.

The feelings of shame, fear, and self-hatred control Bigger’s behavior with the whites. As a result, violence becomes a means of protecting himself from the external forces that estrange him from his self and prevent him from generating a new sense of self, a path that would lead him to authenticity. In other words, Wright aims to demonstrate that the violent reactions that Bigger has developed are a natural response from an oppressed to the subordination and the dehumanization of the oppressor. Bigger’s quest for self-authenticity requires the freedom of the self from the restrictions exerted on it. It, therefore, necessitates dealing with the fear that has eradicated his being. Hence, the murder of Mary Dalton by Bigger is the turning point in his journey to create an authentic sense of self. As previously stated, Bigger did not plan to kill

¹²⁴ Wright, *Native Son*, 51.

¹²⁵ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay in Phenomenological Ontology*, Trans. by Hazel Barnes (New York, New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), 222.

Mary, and it all comes as a response to an external factor that has aroused fear in his heart. However, no one denies the violence of Bigger in dealing with her body. Though Bigger did not plan for the murder, he believes that all his life was leading to such an incident, as the quote shows

His crime seemed natural; he felt that all 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. There was in him a kind of terrified pride in feeling and thinking that some day he would be able to say publicly that he had done it.¹²⁶

Killing Mary is the outlet for Bigger's self. It liberates him from all the negative emotions he suffers from and introduces him to a new, meaningful life. Moreover, the death of the other is his rebirth; a way to reconstruct his self and overcome his sense of estrangement. Bigger is like Camus' Meursault in *The Stranger*, who shows no regret in killing. He, however, feels proud when he thinks of revealing his secret publicly. Likewise, this event empowers him, and he appears more confident in planning for his next move. However, his second murder was intentional. It comes out of his desire to save himself after the truth about his first crime is revealed. In this regard, the murder of Bessie confirms to the reader the rebirth of the new, strong Bigger, who is condemned to be free, a being who dares to challenge the socio-cultural institutions of the whites through violence. The latter is directed outward in an attempt to prove oneself. In this regard, Wright attempts to demonstrate that Bigger's violence is the creation of the white, not his choice. However, he is the one who decides how violent he might be.

The arrest of Bigger marks the beginning of a new phase in his journey. Being alone in a jail cell, free from emotional and social constraints, helps him to think about his deeds. His

¹²⁶ Wright, *Native Son*, 94.

imprisonment transforms him from a violent black shade to an emancipated thinker¹²⁷. The discussions with his communist lawyer, Max, opened his eyes to the truth that was wrapped in violence. Max's defense during the trial drives Bigger to what Lingdi Chen calls "mental maturation"¹²⁸. Even in the private talks they exchange, Max aims to direct Bigger to his self rather than violence; to his true nature, he simply wants him to revalue himself distinctly. Correspondingly, Bigger's critical mind leads him to realize the essence of his authentic existence. The inner change that Sartre emphasizes in his concept of self-authenticity is eventually realized by Bigger. While waiting to be sentenced, Bigger evaluates his journey, declaring that the only "sure and firm knowledge for him, it would have to come from himself" "Aw, I reckon I believe in myself... I ain't got nothing else"¹²⁹. These words illustrate the inner peace with the self, and his understanding of the meaning of true emancipation that should come from his own self, not through exterminating other selves. To put it another way, he is in an assertive position about which self to choose to represent him and govern his thinking and attitudes. Thus, the final words he sent through Max to his mother telling her that he "was all right and not to worry none, see? Tell her I was all right and wasn't crying none."¹³⁰ Confirm his recovery. Wright's Bigger in the final scene reminds us of Camus' Meursault since they both reach peace within their selves while waiting for their execution, which is perceived as their greatest victory that conforms to the sense of self they, eventually, gain. Similarly, the figure of the stranger that *The Outsider* suggests through Cross Damon does not deviate from the character's traits which Wright attributes to Bigger.

¹²⁷ Chen, "An Analysis of the Changing of Bigger Thomas' Behavior," 1859.

¹²⁸ Chen, "An Analysis of the Changing of Bigger Thomas' Behavior," 1858.

¹²⁹ Wright, *Native Son*, 320-326.

¹³⁰ Wright, *Native Son*, 327.

2. Cross Damon's Newly Created Self in Richard Wright's *The Outsider*

The Outsider is, in fact, the work that reveals maturity in the Wrightian world perception. Moreover, the figure of the stranger created in *Native Son* is acutely explored in *The Outsider* through Cross Damon. Therefore, Damon, like Bigger, belongs to that type of character whose inner instability determines the course of his life. The narrative centers around his pursuit of meaning and self-creation in a senseless world.

Damon is an intellectual Black stranger who is unsatisfied with his meaningless life. From the opening scenes, he appears to be struggling with the pain of the socially imposed restrictions that have molded his perception of the self to fall into the trap of self-estrangement. Richard Wright's choice to entitle "Book One" of the novel *Dread* reveals his intention to shed light on Damon's inner conflict and the impacts of the external environment on the self. Wright related the inner turmoil of his character to his social context, which comprises all the social expectations, his mother's demands, his wife's and children's needs, the routine of his life and work, in addition to his young mistress's extortion. In this regard, Damon is aware of the fact that his self is shaped by other people's decisions and choices, not his own. As a consequence, he suffers from dread and anguish due to the lack of freedom that is plundered from him by these outer forces, leaving him in inner chaos. He, eventually, becomes a stranger to his self; the dread creates a deep wound that is difficult to heal.

To support our point of view, Wright's language is the best argument to rely on. The diction the writer uses reveals the inner status of the character. In the first part of the novel, the narrator says

At length he lifted his head and the fingers of his right hand pressed nervously against his lower lip, then his knee as though to still the writhing of his spirit. 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 his thought, mocking him with its stubborn and supine solidarity [...] he was grateful for the sense of depression caused by the alcohol which made him feel less of pressure, pain, anxiety, and hope [...] Suddenly he was filled out with an idea: he would take the gun with him! And if the pressure from within or without became too great he would use it; his gun would be his final protection against the world as well as against *himself*.¹³¹ [Emphasis added]

Going through the words of the above quote makes us realize the anxiety that has plagued Damon. Accordingly, the diction we encounter in the first sentence of the excerpt is an expression of his inner turmoil. This suffering is due to his realization of being a stranger to his body, which is controlled by external powers rather than his own, as might be traced in terms like “alien”, “object”, and “burden”. Moreover, Damon believes that solace can be gained through suicide since it is the only way to end this marriage of inconvenience between the self and the body, and this is what might be understood from Wright’s reference to the gun as a means of protection: the choice that might grant relief to the wounded self from the world. So, death is not primarily considered as protection or prevention from more suffering, but a choice taken to restore Damon’s usurped freedom. In other words, it is the decision taken when one fails to realize his wish; “this wish is a hunger for power, to be in command of oneself.”¹³² All in all, Wright’s diction and intention divulge the estrangement of the self from the body and from the whole world. Accordingly, his language invites the reader to empathize with the character.

The milestone in Damon’s absurd life is the subway crash. It is, therefore, the event that liberates his wounded self. His survival from the accident and the mistaken radio announcement of his death grant him a new life. In fact, he perceives his erroneous death as the declaration of the burial of his old self

¹³¹Richard Wright, *The Outsider* (New York: Harper Collins e-books, 1993), 12.

¹³²Wright, *The Outsider*, 132.

*He was dead... All right... Okay... Why the hell not? Why should he refute it? Why should he deny it? He, of all the 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?"*¹³³ [Emphasis original]

The desire to escape the feeling of being alien to oneself is Damon's reason to leave the news of his erroneous death the way it is in the sight of those whom he used to know. Equally, the attendance of his funeral comes out of an inner desire to confirm the burial of the old Cross Damon by the people who have deprived him of the freedom of choice that we can see in his wish as he says "if they buried that body as the body of Cross Damon, then he was dead, really, legally, morally dead"¹³⁴. Subsequently, the stranger left the churchyard, leaving behind him his past, his people, his pains, and his old, shattered self.

Damon, like all the outsiders analyzed in this study, is urged by the need to create himself and overcome the sense of being an alien to his self. Likewise, Wright in *The Outsider* explicitly demonstrates his lost faith in the socially imposed identity as a significant constituent in the process of self-creation. He agrees with Jean-Paul Sartre's conception that the individual cannot change certain factors such as his race, gender, history, or even social class. Sartre uses the word *facticity* as an umbrella term to describe these factors. However, both Wright and Sartre believe that man can transcend these forces and go beyond them in the journey to make oneself; man is free to choose and create himself. In other words, this created self is what Malesela describes as the one "crafted within and in contestation with facticity"¹³⁵. It is the outcome of the

¹³³ Wright, *The Outsider*, 87.

¹³⁴ Wright, *The Outsider*, 88.

¹³⁵ Malesela John Lamola, "On the Transcendence of Self-Identity: A Philosophical Account of Sartre's Personal Praxis?," *African Identities* (September 2020): 10, doi: 10.1080/14725843.2020.1813082.

intersubjectivity between man's existence and his desire to construct his self through transcending that facticity, since transcendence is what Sartre means by *essence*¹³⁶. This essence of being is what Richard Wright stresses in the novel at hand.

The chance gained after the subway accident detaches Damon from his previous social context. He is born again into the world as a new man. Damon's longing for an authentic life drives him to assume another dead Negro's identity – Lionel Lane- and drop his since it is already buried by his people with his mistaken body. Hence, his body becomes a true stranger to the new assumed self. To put it another way, this leads him to witness a split between his self and the body, which makes McMahon suggest that this split is a form of “privileging of the mind as a detached spectator, and the inability to form sustaining relations with others”¹³⁷. So, his decision to take another person's identity as a way to reconstruct or reform his old self and overcome his self-estrangement, eventually, estranges him from his body instead of liberating him as it might be perceived.

This point of view leads us to discuss an important element to prove that the character's attempt to escape the old self-estrangement results in another form of alienation, which is violence. Firstly, the latter becomes Damon's means to protect his newly created sphere of existence. Arguably, he kills his old colleague, Joe, who recognizes him in the hotel because he is seen as a threat to the existence of his self. He exterminates the others to assert his existence. In other words, the death of the others makes him feel the dominance of the new self over his life. However, it goes to the extreme when he commits serial killings, including the death of two communist leaders and a fascist, as he is responsible for the death of his mother and the suicide of

¹³⁶ Lamola, “On the Transcendence of Self-Identity,” 7-10.

¹³⁷ Frank McMahon, “Rereading “The Outsider”: Double-Consciousness and The Divided Self,” *The Mississippi Quarterly* 50, no. 2 (Spring 1997): 298.

his lover Eva. Hence, the body that once used to be unsatisfied with the submissive self imposed on him by the external forces or the “facticity” of his existence, is now becoming a slave to the newly created self that transcends all limits to play with the whole world and laugh at its irrationality, as Emmanouilidou once suggests¹³⁸. Lastly, the newly created self imprisons the body and condemns it to eternal slavery. Wright develops the concept of violence in both novels, arguing that it is a mode of *self-expression*¹³⁹.

The violence that characterizes *The Outsider* and even *Native Son* is an elucidation of the unstable Black-White relationship. Hence, Wright demonstrates that the Blacks respond with violence in an attempt to fight the invisibility enforced on them by the dominant race and prove themselves as conscious beings who have the right to exist and create from themselves the persons they want to be. Both Bigger and Damon suffer from self-alienation when they become conscious of the absurdity of life. In other words, Wright reveals that this type of alienation is the first reaction of the self when confronting the absurd. On the other hand, the following section seeks to explore whether McCarthy shares the same perspective as Wright.

3. Cornelius Suttree’s Self-Deception and the Quest for Self-Creation in Cormac

McCarthy’s *Suttree*

The storyline of *Suttree* adds a new type of character to the catalog of McCarthy’s protagonists, whose complex nature has always been a topic of investigation by a number of

¹³⁸ Sophia Emmanouilidou, “Construction and Deconstruction: Self-Identity in Abeyance in Richard Wright’s *The Outsider*,” ed. Tirtha Prasad Mukhopadhyay, *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities* 3, no.4 (1953): 546.

¹³⁹ Amritjit Singh, “Richard Wright’s *The Outsider*: Existentialist Exemplar Or Critique?,” *CLA Journal* 27, no. 4 (June 1984): 359.

critics. Therefore, to dissect the complexity of the persona's traits, the Camusian discourse may be the best choice to elucidate the type of inner struggle an individual faces with himself and the external environment as well. In the same way, Sartre's concept of Bad Faith offers theoretical tools to help us understand Suttree's inner troubles.

The analysis that solely deals with the character in isolation from his surroundings can never be accurate due to the dual influence between the former and the environment to which he belongs. Therefore, McCarthy's representation of Knoxville as a city of chaos, disorder, and suffering undoubtedly exerts a psychological impact on the self and compels Suttree to plunge into a vicious circle, wondering over his existential destiny¹⁴⁰. Moreover, Suttree's existential dilemma is the projection of his desire to live a meaningful life in a world that seems to offer none¹⁴¹. Consequently, he falls into the trap of self-estrangement.

Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre have discussed, in their philosophical and literary texts, man's estrangement in a meaningless world they inhabit. Initially, Camus's novels are the literary elucidation of his discourse. In *The Stranger*,¹⁴² he depicts Meursault's struggle with his divided self in a purposeless, absurd universe. In other words, the novel predominantly discloses the way the absurd feelings estrange man from himself. Moreover, such ideas were further explained in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. While Sartre shows that man's alienation is related to the fact of his existence. Hence, the concepts of self-objectification, bad faith, and being-for-Other reveal the detachment of this stranger from himself. Similarly, the selected fiction of Cormac McCarthy and Richard Wright demonstrates a distinctive appropriation of these notions.

¹⁴⁰Elijah Guerra, "Sot's Skull Subsiding, Sweet Nothingness Betide Me": *Suttree* and Sartrean Bad Faith," *Humanities* 6, no. 38 (Jun2017): 1, doi:10.3390/h6020038

¹⁴¹Guerra, "Suttree and Sartrean Bad Faith," 2.

¹⁴² The novel is selected as a theoretical reference because it is the space where Camus better illustrates the concept of the stranger.

McCarthy explores the impacts of death on the human self. The protagonist has been influenced by the death of his twin's stillborn. This tragedy has serious repercussions on Suttree's self, which prevents him from "constructing himself according to the vision he has of his life"¹⁴³. In other words, his obsession with the dead has affected his consciousness to eventually lose his sense of self. Such perception is apparent in the scene where the narrator describes for us the inner turmoil of Suttree, stating that "His fetch comes up from life's other side like an autoscopic hallucination, Suttree and Antisuttree, hand reaching to the hand. The door swung back, and he entered the waiting room."¹⁴⁴ Therefore, he considers himself a living creature with an empty self because of being manipulated by the idea of belonging to the dead. This is what explains his creation of the mirror images of "anti-Suttree" and "other Suttree."¹⁴⁵ Thus, his sense of self is centered around the dread of the loss of his brother instead of his own self-knowledge. Therefore, Suttree's self-negation is an attempt to fill out the existential void he witnesses. Equally, it is also perceived as an externalization of his absurd feelings since "There can be no absurd outside the human mind,"¹⁴⁶ as suggested by Camus. As a result, he becomes a stranger or an outsider to himself. Thus, Suttree's divided self is the direct consequence of the tragic experiences that he went through. Accordingly, Sartre's concept of self-deception, or what is termed Bad Faith, can offer a better understanding of the inner turmoil of McCarthy's outsider.

Suttree's identification with the dead or with past experiences is perceived as a sign of bad faith. In this regard, Sartre explains in detail this concept in *Being and Nothingness*, showing that it is a form of self-deception. In his sight, it is predominantly "a lie to oneself"¹⁴⁷ and a way to

¹⁴³ Guerra, "Suttree and Sartrean Bad Faith," 2.

¹⁴⁴ Cormac McCarthy, *Suttree* (New York: Random House, 1992), 34.

¹⁴⁵ Guerra, "Suttree and Sartrean Bad Faith," 6.

¹⁴⁶ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 21-22.

¹⁴⁷ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 48.

escape from the truth. In other words, it is an inner process at the level of consciousness that implies the affirmation of the truth within oneself while denying it in words, and denying that negation as such.”¹⁴⁸ Thus, the man who is in bad faith attempts to hide an outrageous truth from himself or shows something as a pleasing truth that is not the truth in fact¹⁴⁹. Therefore, this process necessitates “the unity of a single consciousness”¹⁵⁰ because it is the consciousness that affects itself with this bad faith; it does not come from outside. This leads Sartre to suggest that there must be “a project of bad faith”¹⁵¹ within oneself, but one does not intend to be in bad faith. Furthermore, to simplify his concept, he illustrates it with the examples of the waiter and the woman. The former is the person who assumes the role of the café waiter and “plays with his condition in order to realize it.”¹⁵² Since this person, who is in bad faith, is in a constant quest for the ideal, the “Society demands that he limit himself to his function,”¹⁵³ which is a kind of imprisonment for him “in what he is.”¹⁵⁴ So, the adoption of the manners of the waiter is a part of the game he plays. To put it another way, the waiter whom a man wishes to be is not in fact what he is because “There is no common measure between his being and mine. It is a “representation” for others and for myself, which means that I can be he only in representation. But if I represent myself as him, I am not he; I am separated from him as the object from the subject [...] I cannot be he, I can only play at being him.”¹⁵⁵ This case also applies to the woman who denies her responsibility to decide whether to go for a sexual relationship with the man with whom she dates, and ignores the fact that she is a desired object for her companion, to make herself believe that it is an innocent meeting. Thus, these cases explain the forms of self-deception where a

¹⁴⁸Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 48.

¹⁴⁹Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 48.

¹⁵⁰Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 49.

¹⁵¹Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 49.

¹⁵²Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 59.

¹⁵³Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 59.

¹⁵⁴Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 59.

¹⁵⁵Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 60.

believer deceives himself to acquire certain traits that constitute a different self that he wishes to be, while he is not what he is playing. Accordingly, Cormac McCarthy adopts the Sartrean concept in his fourth novel, which displays a distinctive mélange of art and philosophy.

Undoubtedly, Suttree's inner conflict can be explained in what Sartre terms: Bad faith. Thus, his past nightmares and the quest for meaning in life make him fall into the trap of self-deception. Elijah Guerra suggests that "Suttree's ever-present cognizance of the tragedies that were his twin's stillborn and his son's childhood death perpetuate his paralyzing guilt and prevents him from [...] constructing himself according to the vision he has of his life and of all humanity"¹⁵⁶. This inability to overcome his pain, in addition to the desire to deny his responsibility for his household, stimulates him to define himself through self-negation, which is evident when he wonders whether he is "a monster? Are there monsters in me?" In this regard, Suttree does not affirm his sense of self relying on the knowledge he has about his self or by defining himself by his own qualities, but he goes the other way around by assuming that there exists another monstrous Suttree in him. This initial failure to overcome his bad faith is basically due to the inability to assert his personal freedom¹⁵⁷. Then, the shift from self-deception to self-creation requires a grasp of the essence of responsibility and freedom. The latter is what Sartre considers necessary since it constitutes the essence of one's authentic existence, and due to the

¹⁵⁶Guerra, "Suttree and Sartrean Bad Faith," 2.

¹⁵⁷Guerra, "Suttree and Sartrean Bad Faith," 2.

fact that “man is condemned to be free [...] once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does”¹⁵⁸.

The turning point in Suttree’s journey for self-creation is his son’s death. Therefore, the loss of his son creates deep feelings of guilt that are unbearable for him. As a result, in an attempt to redeem his guilty self, Suttree shows his keenness to assume full responsibility for his son’s burial. Hence, the burial scene where “Suttree [...] labored on, shoveling the dirt [...] stopped and took off his jacket and then bent to work again.”¹⁵⁹ is the moment where he buries all his pains and past tragedies to free his self from the past ties¹⁶⁰. In other words, death has shaken his consciousness and made him realize that the past can never be kept while approaching a new phase. Consequently, he succeeds in what Bell Vereen calls “transcending death”¹⁶¹ and moves toward a new project in life. Cormac McCarthy represents this transition from self-negation to self-creation through Suttree’s struggle with typhoid fever, where he was closer to death than to life. His declaration that “there is one Suttree and one Suttree only”¹⁶² shows that he gains the fight against his divided nature and is ready to reform his self. However, we are not here to argue that death is what gives life its own value, as Martin Heidegger claims, but backing up our perception by Sartre’s suggestion that death is a reality rather than a possibility, we assume that the recovery of Suttree from typhoid fever symbolizes the rebirth of a new free self.

Suttree’s first move to reform his self starts with the destruction of McAnally Flats, especially his houseboat which marks the loss of the emotional tie he has with the place with which he used to identify himself. The breakdown of the link he has with his homeland stimulates

¹⁵⁸ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 350.

¹⁵⁹ McCarthy, *Suttree*, 191.

¹⁶⁰ Guerra, “*Suttree* and Sartrean Bad Faith,” 8.

¹⁶¹ Bell M. Varen, *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy* (Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), 69.

¹⁶² McCarthy, *Suttree*, 575.

him to seek the reconstruction of his self elsewhere. This leads us to suggest that Suttree's departure from Knoxville is a practice of his freedom of choice and a mere acceptance of his absurd world because the absurd dies only when we face it or accept it as a part of our reality, as Camus claims. Hence, the process of self-creation is an assertion of the restored control over his life and an embodiment of an absurd free being chasing his true self. However, in *The Road*, McCarthy endeavors to delve deeply into the concept of the self and tackles it from a different angle. Thus, he aims to explore the extent to which the destruction of the material world and the absence of communal life may influence one's self-perception.

4. Flight into the Self: Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and the Issue of Self-definition

The Road introduces to the McCarthian readership two nameless protagonists who struggle with their consciousness and surroundings in an attempt to define their selves and understand their world. Since man is defined as a social being whose perception of his own self is primarily influenced by the presence of the Other, and the cultural values of the social group to which he belongs, he extracts the knowledge about his self by contrasting what he already knows about his self with the Others' attitudes and their vision of *him*. In addition, culture plays a significant role in shaping one's self-definition. But, what if a man, who already had a certain perception of his self, finds himself alone in a degenerated world that he does not recognize and fails to identify himself within. Therefore, the strangeness of the world results in the strangeness of the self. This is what we find in McCarthy's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel. The post-apocalyptic setting results in the destruction of the parameters used to define one's self. So, the characters are lost, and this loss is first pictured with their namelessness. One should note that the lack of names or naming, in general, is closely tied to one's sense of individuality and distinctive identity. Hence, the names given to fictional characters are sometimes inspired by the Bible,

cultural references, or the history of the writer's society¹⁶³. But this never denies the possibility of using existing or imaginative names for literary personas. Therefore, when we give a name to a person or to a fictional character, we define him. In this regard, McCarthy's choice to leave his characters unnamed reveals his intention to have the reader engaged in the protagonists' journey of self-definition¹⁶⁴. But it may also symbolize the destruction of the old self that fades with the disappearance of the parameters of the old world. Hence, the novel demonstrates McCarthy's adoption of the belief that man comes into existence first, then he has the absolute freedom to define or to create his self due to the absence of the metaphysical power -God- in his life. Therefore, the father and his son found themselves unnamed and a part of a newly devastated world that was unknown to them. To put it another way, they come into existence in the post-apocalyptic era as conscious beings, but their trip southward is an attempt to know who they are or an endeavor to create their selves. Simply, they move from the state of existence to the state of recreating their selves.

McCarthy represents his strangers as conscious beings who are aware of their inner void; a technique that we often encounter in Wright's novels as well. To illustrate, in one of the scenes where the man and the boy meet a road traveler who asks them, "What are you? They'd no way to answer the question."¹⁶⁵ The father's failure to define himself and his son demonstrates his inner dilemma since the "extensive store of information"¹⁶⁶ he once had never fitted with the reality they are a part of. McCarthy makes this issue clear for the reader when he establishes a

¹⁶³ Martin S. Lindauer, *Psyche and the Literary Muses: The Contribution of Literary Content to Scientific Psychology* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2009), 79.

¹⁶⁴ The term "self-definition" is used interchangeably with "Self-creation" in this part of the research.

¹⁶⁵ Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 136.

¹⁶⁶ Roy F. Baumeister, "Self and Identity: A brief Overview of What They Are, What They Do, and How They Work," *Annals of the New York Academy of Science*, (2011): 49, doi: 10.1111/j.1749-6632.2011.06224.x.

comparison between the father and the only-named character Ely, as demonstrated in the following conversation

“Is your name really Ely?”

“No.”

“You dont want to say your name.”

“I dont want to say it. Why? I couldnt trust you with it. To do something with it. I dont want anybody talking about me. To say where I was or what I said when I was there. I mean, you could talk about me maybe. I could be anybody. I think in times like these the less said the better.”¹⁶⁷

Through Ely’s words, McCarthy explains the reason behind his reliance on nameless characters. McCarthy’s words lead us to suggest that it is a confession of the fact that names are the first reference to the person’s sense of individuality, distinctive identity, and it is the first step to generating one’s sense of the self. However, his choice to leave his characters unnamed has also been linked to the concept of universality. Ely’s confession that he could be anybody is taken as an argument for the universality of the self as claimed in Kevin Kearley’s *Cormac McCarthy’s The Road and the Frontier of the Human*. He argues that McCarthy’s protagonists might be any man and any boy due to the titles given to them instead of names that are closer to universal symbols¹⁶⁸. However, what we would, rather, add to Kearley’s perception, is that McCarthy’s engagement with such controversial concepts that trouble the post-modern subject does not only aim at creating a cathartic experience for the reader but also indicates the seriousness of the issue in itself which continues to gnaw away at one’s sense self because of the chaos that characterizes the world.

¹⁶⁷ McCarthy, *The Road*, 144-145.

¹⁶⁸ Kearney Kevin, "Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and the frontier of the Human," *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory* 23, no. 2 (May 2012): 164, doi: 10.1080/10436928.2012.676986

The man's journey of self-definition starts with his visit to the ruined house of his childhood. McCarthy says

He stood in the doorway to his room. [...] This is where I used to sleep. My cot was against this wall. In the nights in their thousands to dream the dreams of a child's imaginings, worlds rich or fearful such as might offer themselves but never the one to be. He pushed open the closet door half expecting to find his childhood things. Raw cold daylight fell through from the roof. Gray as his heart.

"We should go, Papa." [...]

"It's all right. We shouldn't have come."¹⁶⁹

This visit is crucial for the father to understand that his old life, dreams, world, and self have vanished with the apocalypse and are now buried among the ruins. The gray "raw cold daylight"¹⁷⁰ that falls from the roof comes to awaken the father from his nostalgia and take him back to reality. While standing in the doorway of his old room, the father "feels alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy."¹⁷¹ In other words, he becomes conscious of being a stranger in a post-cataclysmic universe and a stranger to himself as well because of perceiving or identifying his self with the old world. Hence, this awareness directs his consciousness toward a new way to attain the knowledge needed to recreate his self, which is clear in his declaration to his son in the last sentence of the above excerpt, meaning that chasing past memories is not the right choice.

In McCarthy's *The Road*, the destruction of the world is represented as a lost reference of the self and is, therefore, expressed in stylistic terms. The MacCarthian language "adapts itself aesthetically to the ruined landscape and becomes paradoxically both laconic and evocative"¹⁷². Hence, the novelistic language is loaded with meanings that are expressed in a minimal form

¹⁶⁹ McCarthy, *The Road*, 23.

¹⁷⁰ McCarthy, *The Road*, 23.

¹⁷¹ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 6.

¹⁷² Mohamed Mifdal, "Dystopian Satire in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*: A Language That Echoes the Collapse of the Whole Culture," *Humor and Satire in Literature and Culture*, Ibn Zohr University (2014): 3.

that copes with the general atmosphere. Additionally, Linda Woodson in her analysis of the novel, as reported by Mifdal, suggests that the language used to represent a world where all signs were altered, and humanity is “reduced to the most basic struggle for survival,” is essentialist or what she calls “substantive”¹⁷³. Likewise, the pre-apocalyptic language is, thus, irrelevant to the specificities of the new world. To further illustrate this perception, McCarthy says

He tried to think of something to say but he could not. He'd had this feeling before, beyond the numbness and the dull despair. The world shrinking down about a raw core of parable entities. The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion. Colors. The names of birds. Things to eat. Finally the names of things one believed to be true. More fragile than he would have thought. How much was gone already? The sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so of its reality. Drawing down like something trying to preserve heat.¹⁷⁴

The father believes that all of what once existed in the pre-apocalyptic era is senseless and no longer serves the decaying world, even language. This is what we understand from the following words “Finally, the names of things one believed to be true. More fragile than he would have thought. How much was gone already?”¹⁷⁵ This suggests that language is reduced to its essentialist form, mainly representing what truly exists and has meaning¹⁷⁶. In linguistic terms, any language conveys diverse cultural meanings and historical signs; once these elements are lost, language is downgraded to its primitive function. Moreover, the loss of the signifiers in McCarthy's post-apocalyptic universe is apparent in the language used to portray that specific reality¹⁷⁷. To further explore this perception, the initial sentence in the passage stated above

¹⁷³Linda Woodson, “Mapping *The Road* in Post-Postmodernism,” *Cormac McCarthy Journal* 6 (2008) quoted in Mohamed Mifdal, “Dystopian Satire in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*: A Language That Echoes the Collapse of the Whole Culture,” *Humor and Satire in Literature and Culture*, Ibn Zohr University, (2014): 6.

¹⁷⁴ McCarthy, *The Road*, 75.

¹⁷⁵ McCarthy, *The Road*, 75.

¹⁷⁶Mifdal, “Dystopian Satire in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*,” 7.

¹⁷⁷Mifdal, “Dystopian Satire in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*,” 6-7.

indicates the inadequacy of language to cope with the situation the father experiences, and this is also reinforced when he says “The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion,”¹⁷⁸ meaning that language is also in decay as the world reaches its end. This means that the father’s awareness of the absence of the reference with which he used to identify his old self leads him into a journey to create and define a new self.

Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness* elucidates the concept of self-definition, which is a part of the process of self-creation. Sartre’s phenomenology of existence divides being into diverse categories: being-in-itself, being-for-itself, and being-for-others. The former refers to the non-conscious form of being, including animals and the material sphere of existence. Whereas, being-for-itself refers to the conscious beings, humans. While Being-for-others is left to be discussed in the first chapter of part three under the title *The Existence of the Other*. Chase J. Cloutier, in his article entitled *Love as Seeing in Truth: Sartre and Stein on Self-Constitution* summarizes the Sartrean notion of being-for-others, saying

The meaning of my being is established by my ownself-assertion and creation. I seek absolute freedom to determine my own being and the meaning of my life. I desire to create the meaning of my life within the confines of this freedom. However, the presence of the other is a threat to my freedom. Their objectifying gaze threatens to defeat my freedom by the imposition of their judgment. But through the triumph of my freedom over the other’s, I attain absolute meaning for my being. Yet in so far as I am still being-for-itself, I am limited by the possibility of this changing.¹⁷⁹

So, for Sartre, man is free to create his self and chase meaning in his life, which is a practice of his freedom. However, what he considers absolute freedom is threatened by the objectifying look of the Other. In other words, Sartre believes that the only look a person might receive from the

¹⁷⁸ McCarthy, *The Road*, 75.

¹⁷⁹Chase J. Cloutier, “Love as Seeing in Truth: Sartre and Stein on Self –Constitution,” *Lumen et Vita* 8, no. 2 (2018): 3, doi: 10.6017/LV.v8i2.10505

Other is a look of objectification and hatred¹⁸⁰. Thus, it is the realization of being objectified by the Other is what generates the feeling of hatred and the desire to suppress this Other.

McCarthy's appropriation of these theoretical notions can also be traced in the main character's, the father, interpersonal relations. Firstly, the man's realization of the hostility of the post-apocalyptic era arouses the need for a reformation of his self to fit with this new life. In this regard, he directs his intention to his surroundings in an attempt to acquire the knowledge required to shape the new self. So, the presence of other road travelers is significant for his self-definition since it is through the contrast between the self and the Other that man comes to realize who he really is. Therefore, the identification of the differences between the self and the other or the external environment leads to alienation. Accordingly, the father always alienates himself and his boy from the Other's sphere of existence, as he is ready to shoot any person who dares to challenge their existence. Additionally, his realization of being an object for the Other, eventually, generates feelings of fear which Sartre conceives as "the feelings of being in danger before the Other's freedom."¹⁸¹ This perception might be traced in the novel when the father meets the cannibals who are ready to eradicate him and his son just to assure their own existence as revealed in the following discussion "He said: They're going to kill those people, aren't they? Yes. Why do they have to do that? I don't know. Are they going to eat them? I don't know. They're going to eat them, aren't they? Yes. And we couldn't help them because then they'd eat us too. Yes."¹⁸² Therefore, this otherness is a counter-reaction from the consciousness that resists the dehumanizing attitudes and the objectifying gaze of the Other that leads to the birth of the passive self. The latter, is, indeed, rejected by the self-conscious being- the father- who reacts in a more

¹⁸⁰ Cloutier, "Love as Seeing in Truth," 4.

¹⁸¹ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 268.

¹⁸² McCarthy, *The Road*, 107.

defensive way to protect his freedom. Consequently, the presence of the Other has shaken the inner stability of the for-itself –the father- whose objectification by the other becomes visible to him. To put it another way, the awareness of being both a subject and an object at the same time is what is referred to as the inner split. In other words, the look of the Other begets the self-alienation that *The Road*'s protagonist suffers from and results in his violent attitude toward the Other who becomes a threat to his freedom and existence, in his sight. Through this contrast between the self and the Other, McCarthy demonstrates the impact of the Other's existence on one's self-definition.

Analyzing the boy's self-definition leads us first to explore the nature of the father-son relationship. Interestingly, McCarthy informs us, as readers, that the boy is born in the pre-apocalyptic period, and his young age puts him under his father's wing. Parenthetically, the father's journey to create his self is, in another way, an endeavor to define his son's self. Hence, the boy's attempt to define his self is determined by what his father teaches him as well as through observing his surroundings. Equally, the last discussion the boy had with his father before his death better illustrates our interpretation

"I cant go with you. You need to keep going [...] Do everything the way we did it.[...] Keep the gun with you at all times. You need to find the good guys but you cant take any chances. No chances. Do you hear?"

"I want to be with you."

"You cant. You have to carry the fire"[...]

"I dont know where it is."

"Yes you do."¹⁸³

¹⁸³ McCarthy, *The Road*, 234.

When the man feels death, he asks his boy to keep fighting for survival as he equips him with the necessary instructions he needs in his journey for self-definition. However, the death of the man is a new beginning for the boy. Moreover, the son who was once dependent on his father finds himself, for the first time, the leader and the maker of his own self. Thus, the father's death grants the boy the ultimate freedom to create his self and the meaning he views to his own life. By the end of the novel, we see the inner transformation of the son who assumes the role of the decision-maker who dares to break the old laws of his father who warns him about trusting other road travelers. When he realizes that "Someone was coming. He (the boy) started to turn and go back into the woods, but he didn't [...] I (a veteran) think you should come with me. Are you one of the good guys? [...] He looked at the boy. Yeah, he said. I'm one of the good guys."¹⁸⁴ These lines declare a new adventure the boy takes with the veteran's family. Lastly, this new experience marks the boy's first step to discover who he is and the choice of a new project in life.

The text reveals that man's absurd existence is the reason behind his sense of self-estrangement. It is the chaos that constitutes our reality and the paradox that stands between man's sense of self and this external, futile world that generates the absurd and obliges man to recreate himself in order to defeat it. This means that the journey for self-creation is a *war* against the absurd.

McCarthy's and Wright's selected novels expose a distinctive appropriation of the Sartrean-Camusian concept of self-alienation. Therefore, both writers –each with his own discrete vision– explore the inner crises of the contemporary man who is trapped in living an absurd life. As a result, self-estrangement is born when man first starts questioning everything around him, even himself. Man becomes an outsider to his self when he fails to define the self because of the

¹⁸⁴ McCarthy, *The Road*, 237.

lack of knowledge about this self that may be taken from either his environment, which is the case in *The Road*, or by contrasting oneself with the Other, which Wright highlights in *Native Son*. McCarthy and Wright also show that man can be a stranger to himself when he deceives himself to believe that he is someone who is not at real state -bad faith- which is the case in *Suttree*, or this self-estrangement can be imposed on the person because of the constraints of his facticity in addition to social and cultural values, which Wright's *The Outsider* emphasizes. All in all, both writers discuss the different ways that may lead to the birth of the stranger and his journey to recreate from his self the person he wills to be. Undoubtedly, this sense of alienation leads these characters to undergo another challenge: social distancing. Thus, the latter is the main concern of the following section, which first details the Wrightian-McCarthyian perception of social estrangement and then establishes the link between the former and the protagonists' inner troubles already explored in the current part.

II. Strangers to the Communal Gatherings: R. Wright's and C. McCarthy's Appropriation of the Sartrean-Camusian Discourse

1. Thomas Bigger: The Estranged Violator of Chicago's Social Standards in R. Wright's *Native Son*

Richard Wright's characterization of Thomas Bigger as an outsider who struggles with his divided self indicates other serious repercussions for his sense of belonging at the communal and familial levels. First and foremost, family or home is considered the first social group that constitutes an essential part of human identity. It is, therefore, the space where the person proves himself as well as acquires the skills that will shape his attitudes towards the larger group, society. It is also the space that Tascón Olmedo describes as "the corner of our world, our first

universe”¹⁸⁵ in his analysis of Gaston Bachelard’s notion of Home. Moreover, Wright’s choice to open his *Native Son* with a family scene reveals his intention to emphasize the social status of the Thomas family, which has led to an emotional crack that, in return, obliterates the family bonds within the Thomas. In other words, the financial situation of the family drives Bigger into an endless vortex of existential fear and despair. Bigger does not find comfort and inner peace within the boundaries of his family; he only feels helpless and powerless, as the opening scene of the novel shows

He hated his family because he knew that they were suffering and that he was powerless to help them. He knew that the moment he allowed himself to feel to its fullness how they lived, the shame and the misery of their lives, he would be swept out of himself with fear and despair. So he held toward them an attitude of iron reserve; he lived with them, but behind a wall, a curtain. And toward himself, he was even more exacting.¹⁸⁶

Analyzing the language of the writer gives us access to Bigger’s self. The diction selected by Wright reveals the inner turmoil of his character that results in his alienation from his family. The word “hated” is linked to the “suffering” of his family, which indicates that the Whites are the source of the Black misery, which inevitably generates the feeling of estrangement from the family. This is mainly due to the realization of the “powerlessness” of the Blacks who are unable to initiate change, and Bigger is one of these helpless shadows. Emphasis is put on this perception when Wright drives the reader’s attention to the impacts of the Whites’ racism on the Black’s inner status and social relations. In other words, Bigger who suffers from self-alienation, becomes aware of his limited opportunities in white America, which eventually results in estrangement from his family. Therefore, feelings of “fear” and “despair” are generated as a

¹⁸⁵Samuel Tascón Olmedo, “A Post-Apocalyptic Redefinition of Space in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*,” *ES Review: Spanish Journal of English Studies* 41 (2020): 125.

¹⁸⁶ Wright, *Native Son*, 20.

consequence of his “powerless” situation. Accordingly, he decides to alienate himself from his family and live as an alien among them in order to escape such feelings. Besides, Bigger rejects all restrictions put on his freedom, either by his mother’s persistence to have a menial job or the misery they suffer from. To put it another way, he decides to deny the duty towards his family and remain as a stranger among the blinds, as he refers to them. Additionally, Bigger confirms his status as an outsider after the murder of Mary Dalton. He feels that the crime frees him from the ties that bind him to his family members, as it empowers him. It gives him the push that liberates his self from the existential anxiety and alienates him from his brother, sister, and mother, and he reveals all these emotions in the following declaration “He had a natural wall from behind which he could look at them. His crime was an anchor weighing him safely in time; it added to him certain confidence that his gun and knife did not. He was outside of his family now, over and beyond them; they were incapable of even thinking that he had done such a deed.”¹⁸⁷ Hence, Bigger, as the symbol of a *stranger*, does not conform to the social conventions. His hatred and the denial of responsibility toward his family stand as a wall that separates him from them. Thus, Wright’s Bigger shares the same manners with Camus’s Meursault, who is unable even to fake tears at his mother’s funeral. In other words, the cold-blooded nature estranges these personas from their small social group: family.

Thomas Bigger’s desire for an authentic existence leads him to distance himself not only from the closest people to his heart, family, but even from the people of his own color. In fact, R. Wright does not put any emphasis on Black unity in his novel. He, therefore, never aims to demonstrate the importance of collective struggle in restoring the Black’s lost position in American social and political systems. Wright, however, believes in the ability of the individual

¹⁸⁷ Wright, *Native Son*, 93

to initiate change rather than the community. For him, it is the individual's inner desire to create himself that brings change, not the communal sense that may feed the will for change. The latter is just candlelight that might be blown out at the onset of the first conflict among people, whereas if the flame is inside the person, it can never be off since personal convictions are the fuel that never ends.

Bigger is the literary embodiment of Wright's philosophical perception of life. The creation of the figure of the stranger is one way to direct criticism and rejection of the socio-political reality that constitutes the meaninglessness of life in America. It is the tool through which he exposes and elucidates his view about Black unity. In this regard, Bigger believes that having such a union is a mere dream because of the differences that separate more than they unite his people in Chicago's Black Belt. He believes that he is a stranger to the colored men because of his desire for change, freedom, and the quest for new opportunities. To further illustrate this point, in a conversation Bigger has with his friend Gus, he declares his dissatisfaction with the racial segregation and the lack of opportunities for blacks in white America, saying "why they make us live in one corner of the city? Why don't they let us fly planes and run ships..." Gus [...] "Aw, Bigger, quit thinking about it. You will go nuts"¹⁸⁸. Moreover, Bigger longs to fly planes and run ships; a dream which is never welcomed by the Blacks themselves since it is beyond reach, and this is what makes Gus tell Bigger to put it aside. Bigger is, therefore, represented as the stranger who dares to rob his people, rape black girls, and is even ready to kill friends in order to feel his own existence and escape the prison-like community. He is indeed the violator who challenges the standards of the Black social group and then trespasses into the Whites' alien world.

¹⁸⁸ Wright, *Native Son*, 28.

Bigger shows no respect for the Whites' social conventions. Equally, his behavior is one side of the stranger's nature that Albert Camus theorizes in his novel *The Stranger*. Similarly, Bigger's manners echo those of Meursault, who has no reverence for the death of his mother. Meursault is a man who decides his actions in accordance with his beliefs, with no respect for what others expect from him. The time he spends with his girl after his mother's death and his murder of the Arab for no good reason proves his social estrangement. On the other hand, Wright's character trespasses the Whites' closed universe in the most emancipatory manner. The masturbation scene in the movie theatre is one of the significant scenes that tells a lot about Bigger's nature. In this regard, Aime J. Ellis perceives it as an illustration of "the continuity, cohesiveness, and complexity of defiantly oppositional black male cultural practices, practices that have historically functioned as a means of forging community and sustaining sanity in the midst of the chronic disempowerment"¹⁸⁹. In other words, Bigger turns his back to all the social norms creating his own "homosocial space"¹⁹⁰-to borrow Ellis expression; an open space where to prove his existence. Hence, the act of masturbation in a public space is a smite to the ethics and morals of the larger social group since it is a form of rebellion from the Blacks.

Richard Wright in *Native Son* employs one of the striking techniques for delivering a sharp critique of the U.S. social system: miming racism. Bigger and Gus "play[ing] white"¹⁹¹ or miming the whites' racism is a scene that is intentionally inserted to demonstrate Wright's rejection of the Black's second-class status in the American social system¹⁹². It is, therefore, a projection of the Black's perception of the white's racist attitudes as it may expose the impacts that racism may leave on the black man's self. Moreover, the game is a chance for the Blacks to

¹⁸⁹Ellis, "Black Male Community in Richard Wright's *Native Son*," 185.

¹⁹⁰Ellis, "Black Male Community in Richard Wright's *Native Son*," 185.

¹⁹¹ Wright, *Native Son*, 26.

¹⁹²Ellis, "Black Male Community in Richard Wright's *Native Son*," 188.

externalize their dreams to be powerful, rich, and active American citizens; a legal right that is deprived by the white man. Hence, it is a way of self-assertion against the external forces that threaten Black's existence. It might also be interpreted as Aimé J. Ellis suggests in his article "*Boy in the Hood*", *Black male community in Richard Wright's Native Son*, that the game reveals Bigger's rejection of the partial assimilation with the white Americans¹⁹³.

A critical analysis of the dynamics of the relationship of Bigger with the Whites proves our perception of the protagonist as an estranged violator. His hatred of the whites, empowered by his dissatisfaction with life in the Black Belt, determines his attitude toward the Other. Additionally, Bigger's awareness of the fact that the Blacks are estranged from the dominant community makes his violence a natural response to their segregation. He is, therefore, the estranged violator who trespasses on the Whites' alien world in different ways. First and foremost, the robbery plan of Mr. Blum's delicatessen reveals the essence of the figure of the stranger for Richard Wright. This attempt is what he considers as the act that generates "the feelings that the robbing of Blum's would be a violation of ultimate taboo; it would be a trespassing into a territory where full wrath of an alien white world would be turned loose upon them"¹⁹⁴. Correspondingly, the adoption of anti-social behaviors enables Bigger to conquer his fear of the Other as well as to override the existing law¹⁹⁵. Second, Bigger's two murders, which are analyzed in the previous part of the current chapter, might be interpreted in this context as the outcome of his realization of the jungle rule that governs the white man's social relations. So, to ensure one's existence in "the kingdom of beasts"¹⁹⁶ as Robert Felgar terms it, one needs to

¹⁹³Ellis, "Black Male Community in Richard Wright's *Native Son*," 189.

¹⁹⁴Wright, *Native son*, 23.

¹⁹⁵Ellis, "Black Male Community in Richard Wright's *Native Son*," 190-191.

¹⁹⁶Robert Felgar, "The Kingdom of the Beast" the Landscape of "*Native Son*," *LA Journal* 17, no. 3 (March 1974): 336, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44329059>

acquire the same animalistic attitudes as his adversary. Hence, Bigger is a beast living among the beasts, and his murders are the mimicry of the whites' "bestial monstrosity"¹⁹⁷ towards the Blacks. Lastly, Thomas Bigger's violation of the white's social conventions is an exertion of his own personal law, "kill before being killed"¹⁹⁸. Hence, Bigger, with all the personality traits attributed to him, externalizes the fear and the persecution that black men suffer from in the so-called nation of democracy and racial equality. Richard Wright reinforces this vision in his 1953 novel *The Outsider* with a different type of stranger: an intellectual stranger who eradicates anyone or anything perceived as a threat to his self-existence.

2. Cross Damon Between the Deconstruction of Racist Convictions and the Reconstruction of Social Justice in R. Wright's *The Outsider*

The Outsider reveals a change in Wright's tone as far as social alienation is concerned. In other words, he moves from a naïve, uneducated protagonist of *Native Son* to an intelligent intellectual stranger who dares to challenge the sociopolitical system most distinctively in *The Outsider*. The latter is considered Wright's novel of ideas since it exposes his philosophical interpretation of the Blacks' situation in modern America. Thus, Damon is the literary voice of Richard Wright to the world.

Cross Damon and Thomas Bigger share the burden of the sense of alienation from their family. Bigger is a stranger to his brother, sister, and even his mother, while Damon is alienated from his wife, young mistress, and mother. Initially, Damon's relationship with Gladys is determined by her sense of dependency on him as well as her obsession with full possession of

¹⁹⁷ Felgar, "The Kingdom of the Beast" the Landscape of "Native Son," 336.

¹⁹⁸ Felgar, "Black Male Community in Richard Wright's *Native Son*," 337.

her husband. As a result, Damon's longing for freedom breeds his violent nature, as is revealed in the following lines

He walked in and advanced wordlessly upon her, his eyes fastened on her face. [...] He stood directly in front of her, his eyes unblinking and his face a blank mask [...] He reached forward and gave her a slap with his open palm, not hard, but stinging and with enough force to send her stumbling backwards into a corner.

"Cross!" her voice was not loud, but charged with shock [...]

As he advanced toward her again [...] He roughly seized both of her hands in his left hand and slapped her once more.¹⁹⁹

This representation leads us to suggest that Damon assumes the role of the stranger at home. His violence against his wife estranges him from her due to the "shock" and fear he arouses in her. The diction used by Wright, such as "slap", "force", "shock", "slapped", and "roughly", reveals the violent nature of the protagonist, which stands as a wall between him and his family. Moreover, his desire for inner comfort and an alternative space where he can feel the existence of his self drives him into an illegal relationship with a minor. When Damon realizes that he is trapped to impregnate his minor mistress and his freedom is at stake, alienation is his escape route. Moreover, Damon's mother is the epitome of the conventional Christian female of the black South whose mission in life is to bring up faithful children. However, Damon, as an atheist, rejects his mother and her Christian beliefs. He is like Bigger, who prefers to live behind the curtain when being with her, since she is the symbol of racial and sexual subjugation²⁰⁰. Even the news of her death never arouses feelings of sadness or pathos since he had already killed her in his heart years before her physical death.

¹⁹⁹ Wright, *The Outsider*, 67.

²⁰⁰ Yoshinobu Hakutani, "Richard Wright's *The Outsider* and Albert Camus' *The Stranger*," *The Mississippi Quarterly* 42, no. 4 (Fall 1989): 371.

There exists a reciprocal relationship between this stranger and his family members. On the one hand, they consider him a threat to familial relations and to the stability of the family as a whole. Damon's wife, Gladys, once said, "I can't bear with you another minute. Pack your things and get out, now! You're crazy, a danger to yourself and others!"²⁰¹ Hence, the language of Gladys reveals her assimilation of Damon with hazard since his presence arouses fear and discomfort in her heart as indicated in words like "bear", "crazy", and "danger". On the other hand, Damon himself believes that to be a part of that small social group is a high risk to his freedom. Thus, he shifts his intention to his society in the quest for a purpose in life. Damon, as an intellectual, is able to uncover the absurdity of human existence and then identify the difference between the members of his society and himself. In other words, he eventually estranges himself from his community. In this regard, the representation of Damon does not differ from the one offered in *Native Son* with the character of Thomas Bigger. So, Damon, as an outsider, reinforces the Wrightian vision of the stranger previously exposed in *Native Son*.

The biographer of Richard Wright, Constance Webb, once said, "For the outsider was one who no longer responded to the values of the system in which he lived"²⁰². So, the figure of the stranger created by Wright is a serious danger to his community and to its value system since he aims to establish his own system and to create his own meaning due to his belief that social life with all its established institutions is senseless for him. Hence, Damon opposes the whites' moral, cultural, and legislative institutions. Initially, his immoral attitudes first characterize his relationship with his wife when he commits adultery and reveals his disrespect for the marriage institution. Moreover, after the subway crush, Damon tricks people into believing that he died in

²⁰¹Wright, *The Outsider*, 72.

²⁰² Constance Webb, *Richard Wright: A Biography* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1968), 313, quoted in Hayes W. III, Floyd, "The Paradox of the Ethical Criminal in Richard Wright's Novel *The Outsider*: A Philosophical Investigation," *Black Renaissance Noire* 13, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2013):166.

the accident and then attends his funeral to confirm his detachment from the old world he once belonged to. He, later, dares to deceive his acquaintance in New York with a dead man's identity. Furthermore, he plays the role of an alien being in a distinctive way, which makes people around him fear his presence in their lives. This perception of Damon is evident in the confrontation that the District Attorney organizes between Damon and his wife, children, as well as friends

“I had your wife and children flown here this morning from Chicago...” [...] “Mrs. Damon,” Houston began in a loud, clear voice, “do you recognize this man standing there?” Houston pointed at Cross.

Gladys slowly turned her face and stared at Cross with wet, red eyes. Then she quickly bowed her head; both of her hands convulsively covered her face in one shuddering motion and her chest heaved as she wept in dry gulps.

Houston gently grasped her shoulder and led her to a chair. “I’m asking you: Do you recognize this man as your husband, Mrs. Damon?” Houston demanded.

Gladys was still, then she shook her head with a slow, dreamy movement, shook it negatively. [...] Cross burst into a gale of laughter that made the bodies of everyone in the room jerk. Houston gaped at Cross.²⁰³

When Gladys faces her ex-husband, her body shrinks as she falls into a state of shock, as if she has seen a monster. Her body language proves the amount of terror his presence arouses in her, since he is a source of danger. Houston's attempt to trap Damon into confessing his crimes eventually fails. Damon's cold-blooded nature, empowered by his high intelligence, allows him to laugh at the world order and escape all sorts of indictments.

Cross Damon is Richard Wright's critical voice to the White culture. He believes that the American culture is dehumanizing and empty of the slogans it disseminates²⁰⁴. For Wright, the culture that enslaves a free being alienates him from politico-economic activities, and assimilates

²⁰³Wright, *The Outsider*, 353.

²⁰⁴Floyd, “The Paradox of the Ethical Criminal in Richard Wright's Novel *The Outsider*,” 169.

him into an animal who lives to serve others and satisfy his biological needs, is a dehumanizing culture. He perceives modern culture and civilization as barbaric and primitive. Both strangers in *Native Son* and *The Outsider* reject second-class citizenship, seeking power and equal rights as true American citizens. As far as Damon is concerned, his acceptance of the invitation of the communist leader, Gil, to share residence with him and join the communist party is out of his keen desire to be equal to the white man in power and opportunities. Damon goes to the extreme in his quest for recognition when he kills Gil to gain access to his wife Eva. Damon's attraction to Gil's widow is not only a manifestation of the repressed feelings that a black man has towards a white woman, but it is also an expression of self-assertion and a way to be accepted as a part of the White community.

The American legal system is also put on the dock. *The Outsider* externalizes Wright's call for reformation in the judicial and legislative spheres. He considers the American legal system as a mere illusion that camouflages the true jungle. Through his stranger, he comments on the myth of civilization, questioning us, "You call this *civilization*? I don't. This is a jungle. We pretend that we have law and order, but we don't, really. We have imposed a visible order, but hidden under that veneer of order, the jungle still seethes."²⁰⁵ Wright relies on short sentences to put more emphasis on the idea in itself in order to avoid distracting the reader's attention with wordy sentences and sophisticated diction. Through his character, he claims that the legal system is made by illegal persons who are full of criminal feelings, which allow them to create criminal codes²⁰⁶. Accordingly, this vision is evident through the word choice in the above quote, such as "jungle", "pretend", "imposed", "veneer", and "seethes". Consequently, the protagonist's

²⁰⁵ Wright, *The Outsider*, 131.

²⁰⁶ Floyd, "The Paradox of the Ethical Criminal in Richard Wright's Novel *The Outsider*," 266.

awareness of the injustice of the system is what breeds his violence. Hence, Wright reproduces a more complex version of Thomas Bigger in Cross Damon.

Damon rejects the whole social system that marginalizes and estranges him from his self and his people. Likewise, he considers himself an alien in that jungle, an innocent creator who strives to survive among the beasts. He never feels guilty for the four crimes he commits since he believes that he is innocent, an “ethical criminal”²⁰⁷ as Floyd W. Hayes describes him. The victims he chooses are judged and “had found guilty of insulting his sense of self and had carried out a sentence of death upon them”²⁰⁸. Besides, Wright’s *The Outsider* suggests another revolutionary type of stranger; a Whiteman- the district attorney. The latter shares the same philosophical perception of the world as Damon. Moreover, he is represented as the only character who understands and is able to interpret Damon’s behaviors since he is an outsider as well. Mr. Houston is the voice of the law in the novel which is primarily created to demonstrate the illusory state of the American law system. To further illustrate this vision, though the district attorney succeeds in deciphering the enigma of Damon’s crimes, he does not find him guilty because he is aware of the fact that the injustice of the white man is the creator of such an ethical criminal. Lastly, Mr. Houston and Damon are the strangers who step out from their community because they find it difficult to tolerate the injustice and the absurdity of social life.

To conclude, Richard Wright’s fiction is an expression of his inner wound left by racial segregation and the lack of opportunities he suffered from in his homeland. His strangers voice his critique of the ugly reality of American society. The image he offers is a reevaluation of the essence of the black man’s life in modern America. On the other hand, his successor, Cormac

²⁰⁷ Floyd, “The Paradox of the Ethical Criminal in Richard Wright’s Novel *The Outsider*,” 266.

²⁰⁸ Wright, *The Outsider*, 223.

McCarthy, in *Suttree* and *The Road*, suggests a reexamination of the concept of communal alienation as the following section indicates.

3. Cornelius Suttree: An Enigmatic Stranger of the Tennessee River in McCarthy's *Suttree*

Suttree's past wounds drive him into a vortex of inner struggle, which later estranges him from his family and society as a whole. Thus, the McCarthian image of the stranger shares certain affinities with the one Richard Wright constructs through Thomas Bigger and Cross Damon. However, this never denies the existence of several differences that constitute the uniqueness of the characterization of each novelist.

Cormac McCarthy declares to his reader from the opening of the novel that his stranger has not been with his wife for thirteen years. This declaration is a challenge to the American metaphors of dwelling places and a collective identity²⁰⁹ which "have always been fashioned as emblems of the family"²¹⁰. Hence, *Suttree* is a tool used by the author to reassess such a conviction. In other words, the outsider's estrangement from his wife and child proves the McCarthian vision of the impermanence of such spaces, which are a mere delusion²¹¹. So, *Suttree* is just like Bigger and Damon, whose utmost goal in life is the pursuit of freedom of choice, the quest for order in life, and the reconstruction of his shattered self. Consequently, the emotional tie that binds him to his family is exterminated by distance and irresponsibility. Like the two

²⁰⁹ Terri Witek in his analysis of Cormac McCarthy's domestic spaces assumes that the American's constructed metaphors about human existence which are primarily intended to represent the reality of the so-called *American Home* are mainly ideological. Seemingly, McCarthy opposes such an ideology.

²¹⁰ Terri Witek, "Reeds and Hides: Cormac McCarthy's Domestic Spaces," *The Southern Review* 30, no. 1 (1994): 136+. *Gale Literature Resource Center* (accessed January 25, 2023): 24 <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A14844772/LitRC?u=anon~31a18214&sid=googleScholar&xid=8df0e40f>

²¹¹ Witek, *Reeds and Hides*, 24.

strangers of Wright who were used to criticize certain social realities, we claim that it is also the case with Suttree.

McCarthy also seems to direct a sharp critique of the bourgeois lifestyle and morality through the protagonist's rejection of his father's wealth. Moreover, Suttree turns his back on the luxurious life among his people because his worldview differs from theirs. He, therefore, lives alienated around the Tennessee River in Knoxville, where he works as a fisherman. He lives in alienation from social gatherings since he accepts and embraces the absurdity of his existence²¹². Suttree's estrangement drives him to declare the denial of the blood ties with his family during the visit of Uncle John to his houseboat. The latter attempts to gain the old Suttree who has long been buried somewhere among Suttree's memories. However, the stranger goes against the tide, rejecting any sort of common characteristics between himself and any other member of the family, saying, "I'm not like you. I'm not like him. I'm not like Carl. I'm like me. Don't tell me who I'm like"²¹³. These words speak of his rejection of the familial bonds which is due to his quest for freedom and the desire for self-creation, but it remains as a source of captivity as long as he is still roaming around Knoxville as proposed by Elijah Guerra in her analysis of the nature of the relationship between this character and his family that is predominantly perceived as "a commitment that binds him to active resistance of, and a contradictory concern for, those he wishes to remove from his life. Thus, it seems that his rejection of his family is both a source of freedom and captivity."²¹⁴ Hence, the complete detachment from his people can never be if he does not leave Knoxville.

²¹² Elijah Guerra, "Nothingness is Not a Curse" Suttree's Absurd Revolt," *The Cormac McCarthy Journal* 17, no. 2 (2019):156, doi:10.5325/Cormmccaj.17.2.0148

²¹³ McCarthy, *Suttree*, 19.

²¹⁴ Guerra, "Suttree and Sartrean Bad Faith," 8.

The social alienation of Cornelius Suttree is emphasized in the novel through language. In other words, McCarthy divulges the protagonist's estrangement from his community, including the family, linguistically. In this regard, the conversation between Suttree and his uncle, in the first part of the novel, is one of the examples where McCarthy relies on brevity in communication between his protagonist and the others:

"How are you?" [Suttree asks]
 "Fine. Fine. How is everything going?"
 "All right. How did you find me?"
 "I saw John Clancy up at the Eagles and he said that you were living in a houseboat or something so I looked along the river here and found you."
 [...] Suttree looked at him. "Did you tell them where I was?"
 He stopped smiling. "No no," he said. "No. That's your business."
 "All right."
 [...] "Well, we hadn't heard anything. How long has it been?"
 "Who's we?"
 "I hadn't heard. I mean I didn't know for sure if you were even out or not."
 "I got out in January."²¹⁵

If we consider Suttree's response in the above dialogue, we notice that his answers are short, concise, and to the point. He either responds with questions or with the discourse marker "All right". Therefore, his minimal exchange reveals his inward nature and the emotional distance he keeps between himself and the others, giving no importance to the fact that the man with whom he is conversing is his uncle. This perception is further emphasized when Suttree visits his aunt Martha, as we can see in the following excerpt

"Hello, Aunt Martha."
 [...] "Lord have mercy," she said. "Buddy? Why Buddy."
 "How are you?"
 "Oh lord," she said. She was tiny and frail and the hand that tucked at him trembled like a bird. "Come in," she said.
 [...] "Set down, Buddy," she said, [...] "Let me just warm you up some dinner."
 "Don't bother with that, Aunt Martha. I just stopped by for a minute."

²¹⁵McCarthy, *Suttree*, 14.

“It’s not any bother. You just set there. You want a glass of cold sweetmilk?”
 “Yes mam, I’d love one.”²¹⁶

So, Martha openly expresses her happiness to receive Suttree, which is evident in expressions like “Lord have mercy”, “Buddy?”, “Oh lord”, and others. While McCarthy’s minimalism makes Suttree’s speech seem cold since it is devoid of any sort of emotions, which reinforces his silent nature and isolation from the people around him. In this regard, if we compare Martha’s words to Suttree’s, we realize the juxtaposition the writer establishes between the two personas which obliges us to pay attention to the characterization he offers to the protagonist just through the language the character uses. Hence, McCarthy exposes the social estrangement of his outsider linguistically. These feelings of estrangement pushed him to opt for a self-exile due to his realization of the inability to identify himself as a member of the group.

City life also takes its share from the McCarthian critique. Seemingly, Cormac McCarthy opposes the city mode and the community it stands for. In this regard, Cornelius Suttree, in self-chosen exile from his family, prefers the environs of Knoxville to be his first destination. Thus, the desire to quench his thirst by escaping all sorts of social constraints to gain the ultimate freedom and reform his ruined self makes him reside by the Tennessee River. Consequently, this new dwelling makes him closer to criminals, prostitutes, and witches as he lives “among vendors and beggars and wild street preachers haranguing a lost world with a vigor unknown to the sane.”²¹⁷ Though he establishes good relations with these people, he never feels a part of that community. He is a character who is always on the move in search of the lost piece of the enigmatic puzzle: his self. In fact, this is the reason that makes him fail in all the attempts to make familial relations with the outcast people, especially the Reese family, whom he joins to

²¹⁶ McCarthy, *Suttree*, 151.

²¹⁷ McCarthy, *Suttree*, 82.

make a fortune with mussel hunting. Thus, Suttree cannot adapt himself to any communal gatherings, neither his dominant community nor the newly joined group, because they are also perceived as impermanent with a morality that opposes his²¹⁸.

Suttree is the outsider who finds the social life unbearable and absurd: nothing more than “a terrestrial hell.”²¹⁹ Accordingly, his anti-social behaviors express his dissociation from the communal background of the modern man. These attitudes are not typified by the violence that we have already encountered with the Wrightian strangers. Though Suttree lives in isolation from the outcast people, he is most times involved in a direct confrontation with the law and morality of the dominant community. For instance, the criminal plans of Gene Harrogate- a young man whom he first met in prison- in which Suttree is involved most of the time. He once agreed to buy strychnine to Harrogate, who “untied the string and lifted a glass vial from the paper and examined it. A pale label with a green skull and bones. Shithouse mouse, he said. Thanks Sut. I sure as shit appreciate it. You owe me two dollars. Old buddy, that kind of money aint nothin now. You’ll have it in the mornin.”²²⁰ Hence, to gain the one-dollar Board of Health bounty, he agrees to drop the ethics and laws of his people. Similarly, Suttree’s criminality is also reinforced when he plans to rob the Knoxville bank through the extensive cave system of the city²²¹.

Eventually, *Suttree* expresses McCarthy’s philosophical perception of the absurdity of human existence. It, therefore, demonstrates the way the absurd feelings of the modern man influence his perception of the self and interpersonal relations in a quest for an authentic space of existence. Hence, this view is further explored in *The Road*, but with a bitter tone.

²¹⁸ Guerra, “Suttree’s Absurd Revolt,” 166.

²¹⁹ McCarthy, *Suttree*, 13.

²²⁰ McCarthy, *Suttree*, 268.

²²¹ Thomas D. Young, “The Imprisonment of Sensibility: *Suttree*,” *Southern Quarterly* 30, no. 4 (Summer 1992): 72.

4. The World of Fugitives: A Redefinition of Social Alienation in C. McCarthy's *The Road*

The Road exposes a shift in the McCarthian perception of the concept of social estrangement. In other words, McCarthy attempts to redefine the concept to correspond to the general atmosphere of his novel. Initially, *The Road* is a dystopian post-apocalyptic work that first demonstrates an appropriation of the tenets of dystopia. Hence, the novel has no reference to the socio-political life of the post-modern period that we often find in classical dystopian novels. So, the dystopian genre is appropriated in order to fit into the post-apocalyptic mode of narration. Moreover, the communal and city life that we have encountered in his *Suttree* or *Native Son*, and *The Outsider* of Wright are not found in *The Road*. Indeed, the cataclysmic event eradicates the social infrastructure and even the world civilization to the ground, leaving few survivors to struggle with the post-apocalyptic environment. Subsequently, McCarthy's strangers are represented as homeless characters who are deprived of the slightest right to be in a comfortable, safe dwelling. In other words, they are pictured as lost shadows roaming around "the black vacuum of the universe,"²²² as the father says

He walked out in the gray light and stood and he saw for a brief moment the absolute truth of the world. The cold relentless circling of the intestate earth. Darkness implacable. The blind dogs of the sun in the running. The crushing black vacuum of the universe. And somewhere two hunted animals trembling like groundfoxes in their cover. Borrowed time and borrowed world and borrowed eyes with which to sorrow it.²²³

The father's realization of the truth of the world he belongs to enables him to categorize himself and his boy in accordance with the reality around them. He believes that they are the strangers who inhabit a strange, decaying world when he first speaks of the "black vacuum" Then he

²²² McCarthy, *The Road*, 110.

²²³ McCarthy, *The Road*, 110.

refers to himself and his son as “hunted animals” who are chased by the inescapable absurdity. Contrary to Suttree, Bigger, and Damon, who estrange themselves from their family and then become homeless, *The Road* offers a redefinition of the concept of homelessness. The latter, due to the cataclysm that has shaken the world order, homelessness, which once used to be perceived as a “transitory condition,”²²⁴ becomes a universal reality. Thus, Bachelard’s notion of home as a safe space for daydreaming is altered by Cormac McCarthy.²²⁵ The latter suggests a post-apocalyptic setting characterized by horror and existential despair, which leaves no space for daydreaming. Likewise, the absence of a safe home estranges the protagonists from the whole world since they feel clueless and lost²²⁶.

McCarthy appropriates the concept of homelessness to describe the effects of post-apocalypse on the characters’ sense of belonging to a communal gathering and their world perception. First and foremost, as we have seen in the previous part of the chapter, the post-apocalypse estranges the two main characters- the father and his son- from themselves and then throws them unarmed to face a devastating universe. Consequently, the “Cold. Desolate. Birdless”²²⁷ land portrayed in *The Road* represents the remains of the pre-apocalyptic society with its scavengers, cannibals, thieves, and unethical people who push our strangers to their limits. In other words, the father with his son, during their journey southward, alienate themselves from the other road travelers because they believe that the new world order is a threat to their existence, including the other who shares with them the inhabited space, while the social life is deprived of its value. The cities that were once the cradle of civilization have become desolate, where

²²⁴Samuel Tascón Olmedo, “A Post-Apocalyptic Redefinition of Space in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*,” *ES Review: Spanish Journal of English Studies* 41 (2020): 124.

²²⁵Tascón Olmedo, “A Post-Apocalyptic Redefinition of Space,” 125.

²²⁶Tascón Olmedo, “A Post-Apocalyptic Redefinition of Space,” 126.

²²⁷ McCarthy, *The Road*, 182.

Murder was everywhere upon the land. The world soon to be largely populated by men who would eat your children in front of your eyes and the cities themselves held by cores of blackened looters who tunneled among the ruins and crawled from the rubble white of tooth and eye carrying charred and anonymous tins of food in nylon nets like hoppers in the commissaries of hell²²⁸.

Death and cannibalism dissociate man from the other since the danger is ubiquitous and unavoidable. The terrifying image of the communal life described by McCarthy when he says that the world will be populated by cannibals, justifies the protagonists' alienation from the group of other survivors. Additionally, a bleak image is constructed of the urban landscape through the cities that preserve the remains of its inhabitants and the ruins of dead civilizations that leave no sign or hope for communal life. The scavengers are described as "looters" and "shoppers" who roam among the ruins searching for things to replenish their empty stomachs. So, alienation is the protagonists' first move in order to secure themselves and overcome the existential despair and fear created by the apocalypse while traveling southward seeking safety and a more tolerable climate. It is, therefore, the solution at hand to avoid cannibals, scavengers, and thieves.

The characters' estrangement from any communal gathering requires a foundation of a new value system that controls their behaviors towards the other, as we have already seen with Bigger, Damon, and Suttree. Similarly, in *The Road*, the father relies on myth creation and fantastic stories to instill the required values into his son's mind. Accordingly, he makes his son believe that they are the "good guys" whose mission is to "carry the fire" and they are different from the other road travelers as is illustrated in the following discussion "We're going to be okay, aren't we Papa? Yes. We are. And nothing bad is going to happen to us. That's right. Because we're carrying the fire. Yes. Because we're carrying the fire."²²⁹ McCarthy's reliance on

²²⁸ McCarthy, *The Road*, 152.

²²⁹ McCarthy, *The Road*, 70.

minimalism is apparent in the short affirmative sentences, which are primarily used to confirm the already instilled myth in the boy's mind. These invented myths and fictional stories serve the father's aim to create in his son the will to fight for existence, and his words stand for this view when he says "Okay. This is what the good guys do. They keep trying. They don't give up. Okay."²³⁰ However, McCarthy throws light on the moral clash that continues to gnaw away at contemporary social life. He therefore shows the impacts the external environment may have on the individual's ethics. Hence, he projects the way the post-apocalyptic reality pushes his characters to give up their moral ideals and adopt the dominant attitudes. In this regard, Tascón Olmedo suggests that "Due to the surrounding violence [...] the homeless characters are forced to reflect upon the meaninglessness and vanity of human existence, and that feeling provokes, besides the aforementioned existential anxiety, a crisis in the traditional moral and religious values which appear constantly questioned in the novel."²³¹ Subsequently, violence turns out to be the father's means of survival in the devastated world they inhabit. Therefore, the McCarthian perception of violence as a natural response to external stimuli is similar to Richard Wright's vision of the concept.

The last parts of the narrative show a transition in the father's attitudes from ethical to violent, which contributes to enlarging the gap between our strangers and the other survivors. Parenthetically, violence is not a choice, but an obligation for the protagonists to ensure their existence. In this regard, Tascón Olmedo in his study of the post-apocalyptic space in McCarthy's novel states that "It is important to notice that the act which triggers the apocalypse always has a violent nature which eventually leads to the destruction of human society (being it a natural calamity or a consequence of direct or indirect human actions), and, thus, in a

²³⁰ McCarthy, *The Road*, 116.

²³¹ Tascón Olmedo, "A Post-Apocalyptic Redefinition of Space," 129.

postapocalyptic setting more than ever, violence begets violence.²³² He believes that violence dominates human relations in the post-apocalypse. So, the father's new violent nature is out of his realization of the danger around him, and in fact, this is what justifies Tascón Olmedo's expression "Violence begets violence". Hence, the dominance of violence leaves no chance for the reconstruction of any sort of social relations in the McCarthian devastated universe. Correspondingly, alienation and self-security become a priority for the father to the extent that he becomes ready to kill. Equally, the scene where he fails to contain his anger when he catches the thief, of their cart full of supplies, who is stripped naked to face death, leads the boy to confess that they "did kill him"²³³ in a certain way. All these ideas are reinforced through the narrative style relied on in the text.

The minimalist style plays a significant role in the portrayal of the ugly reality, which eventually leads to the birth of this violent nature that aims to ensure self-existence. So, McCarthy relies on fragmented sentences known for the lack of coordination,²³⁴ and the distinct use of contractions. He says

"You think we're going to die, dont you?"
 "I dont know. We're not going to die".
 [...] "Why do you think we're going to die?"
 "We dont have anything to eat."
 "We'll find something."
 "Okay. How long do you think people can go without food?"
 "I dont know."
 "But how long do you think?"
 "Maybe few days."²³⁵

This conversation seems to be punctuated with an uncomfortable silence, which is depicted through the absence of coordination between the sentences. Therefore, these short and

²³²Tascón Olmedo, "A Post-Apocalyptic Redefinition of Space," 129.

²³³ McCarthy, *The Road*, 219.

²³⁴Mifdal, "Dystopian Satire in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*," 7.

²³⁵ McCarthy, *The Road*, 85.

fragmented sentences written in a minimal style are also characterized by the meticulous use of contractions. Hence, some words are marked with the absence of apostrophes, especially those that express negation like “I dont” and “you dont” and the choice of such a device is, firstly, meant to meet certain stylistic needs.²³⁶ Secondly, McCarthy, through this device, aims to represent a fragmented, absurd reality that inevitably stimulates man’s instinct for survival because the omission of the apostrophes is symbolically linked to all that has already gone from the world of *The Road*, including the man’s old self which had dominated the pre-apocalypse. So, the quest for a new self is more than a necessity. However, it should be noted that there are other words that retain their apostrophes like “we’re” and “we’ll”. These cases that are punctuated need their apostrophes because of the presence of personal pronouns which emphasize the human agent.²³⁷ This is what had led Banco to suggest that McCarthy “plays between the apostrophized and the unapostrophized contractions.”²³⁸ Such a proclamation encourages us to claim that McCarthy’s style is a clear expression of the fragmented reality the narrative represents.

Cormac McCarthy provides us with a new vision of social alienation in *The Road*. He offers a distinctive mélange of the sub-genres of science fiction: dystopia and the post-apocalypse. The setting he relies on requires a reformation and redefinition of certain notions like homelessness. He also elucidates that isolation from social gatherings is a choice of the characters to ensure their self-existence and an expression of their desire to seek an authentic space of existence.

Lastly, this part of the chapter analyzes the McCarthian-Wrightian perception of social alienation in *Native Son*, *The Outsider*, *Suttree*, and *The Road*. It offers a critical analysis of the

²³⁶ Lindsey Banco, "Contractions in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*," *The Explicator* (2010): 227.

²³⁷ Banco, "Contractions in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*," 227.

²³⁸ Banco, "Contractions in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*," 228.

selected concept in McCarthy's and Wright's novels as it throws light on the differences in the perception of social alienation by both authors. But this never denies the existence of several affinities in their vision of the concept. Both writers show that the inner troubles of the strangers lead to their estrangement from the external world, family, and society. These strangers are represented as a threat to the world and the people around them because of their violent nature and adoption of anti-social attitudes. Besides, the analysis of the writers' language is one way to prove Wright's and McCarthy's appropriation of the Sartrean perception of the Other and Camusian view of community in the four novels. Accordingly, both novelists break the link between the self and the Other. In other words, through their novels, they promote the view that man creates himself and is the source of change in his own life. This stance demonstrates the intention of Wright and McCarthy to direct criticism to certain institutions and conventions that dominate the social reality. While the last part of the current chapter is devoted to explore the consequences of such an estrangement, escapism into an alternative world chosen by the strangers to rescue their lost selves and feel their existence.

III. The Strangers' Escape into an Alternative World in R. Wright's and C. McCarthy's Novels

1. Thomas Bigger's Mythical Strange Land and Cross Damon's Dream World in Wright's *Native Son* and *The Outsider*.

Richard Wright, in the two selected novels, narrates the journey of his characters who fight to prove their existence in a wild world governed by jungle rule. Both novels epitomize the absurd conflict between the stranger's self-alienation, communal estrangement, and the keen desire to be in an authentic space where one can feel the existence of the self. Besides, Wright

shows that the suffering of his alien characters from self-estrangement and their rejection of the restricted freedom in a prison-like community eventually leads them to escape into an imaginative space where to heal their shattered selves. This escapism is the first reaction of the self to the feelings of the absurd, which have estranged it from itself and from the whole universe.

As we have seen in the preceding parts of this chapter in *Native Son*, the main character's divided self has affected not just his sense of self, but the sense of belonging to his family is also threatened. Our stranger embraces the isolation from his family members, whom he considers as blind, aimless shades when compared to the Whites or to himself. He is the one who understands the dynamics of the world order and longs for a meaningful existence. So, his self-estrangement, communal, and family alienation make him lost and push him to escape to an alternative space where Bigger's self is proven. In this regard, to achieve the sought-after goal, his life takes another direction.

In the different stages of the novel, Bigger appears searching for a space where he ignores all about his anguish, fear, and even the world, just to feel the dominance of the self. He, first, unites his self with nature, which grants him temporary solace. Wright shows that this outsider embraces the loneliness in the streets where he is free from coercive and patriarchal forces. In this regard, Aimé J. Ellis says, "Bigger finds solace in the 'streets,' where he is temporarily free from patriarchal-familial responsibility and the emasculating torment and pressure of his mother. Recall the harsh words she directs toward him at the breakfast table 'Bigger, sometimes I wonder why I birthed you,' and 'Honest, you the most countest man I ever seen in all my life.'" ²³⁹ Hence, he escapes to nature in quest for inner comfort. He later moves his intention to another sphere

²³⁹ Ellis, "Black male community in Richard Wright's *Native Son*," 194.

where pleasure is craved.²⁴⁰ Likewise, he escapes into the world of gratification in an attempt to nurture his masculinity in the movie theatre through masturbation. Bigger once believed that the sensual world may be the means to assemble his shattered self; an outlet that helps him to free his self from social restrictions. Moreover, he also lands his foot in the world of fantasy where mimicry signifies the aspired power Bigger dreams to gain. Playing white with his friend is an exodus from a world of dehumanization and despair to a dream world. Bigger and his black follower personify the role of the U.S. president, J.P. Morgan, who is in charge of the business world, and generals in the army. The selection of these characters to play indicates the will to recreate a world of power and control where the self dominates the other. It is what Aimé J. Ellis considers "a symptomatic of an attempted racial negation,"²⁴¹ Reenacting for themselves a world of power and control.

These three spaces where Bigger escapes offer him provisional satisfaction. However, his murder of Mary Dalton declares the construction of Bigger's "mythical strange land,"²⁴² as Wright says. The crime not only announces him as a stranger to the community or to his family, but it flies with his self into an alternative strange land where he and only he is the dominant power "He was following a strange path into a strange land and his nerves were hungry to see where it led" [...] "Men adjust themselves to their land; they create their own laws of being; their notions of right and wrong."²⁴³ In the new kingdom, Bigger seeks inner peace and aims to restore his self-existence which he once lost among the beasts. Thus, escaping reality to an unreal world is a direct consequence of the sense of alienation as it is an expression of the character's lost status and wounded self which he aims to cure elsewhere.

²⁴⁰ Ellis, "Black male community in Richard Wright's *Native Son*," 194.

²⁴¹ Ellis, "Black male community in Richard Wright's *Native Son*," 187.

²⁴² Wright, *Native Son*, 99.

²⁴³ Wright, *Native Son*, 99-303.

This image of the stranger, which is constructed in *Native Son*, is further developed in *The Outsider*. So, Richard Wright, in his 1953 novel, shows more maturity in the perception of the concept. Thus, Cross Damon is the complex version of Thomas Bigger who is naïve with limited mental abilities that fail to save him from prison. However, Damon is characterized by a high level of intelligence and good manipulation of his surroundings.

In our analysis of the Wrightian reevaluation of the essence of the black man's existence in contemporary American society, we point out the literary tradition that Wright establishes in his treatment of the concept. He intentionally demonstrates the way his strangers move from the old state of existence, which is characterized by inner dissatisfaction, into a new sphere of existence. This is, in fact, what we attempt to trace with Bigger and Damon. As far as Damon is concerned, the first part of the novel is entitled *Dread* and is intended to describe the protagonist's inner status. As previously stated, when we analyzed Damon's self-estrangement, he lives in a closed environment where his life is shaped by other people's decisions, which, eventually, drives him into a vortex of dread. Hence, in an attempt to escape his existential dread, Damon behaves the same way Bigger does. The sensual world is his first resort, not because he is in need of sexual gratification to prove his self-existence like Bigger, but because his utmost goal is to be with an empathetic person with whom he can share not only feelings but, most importantly, his world perception. So, the adultery he commits is an attempt to reinvent a new space of existence in which to implement his own convictions and escape suffering. However, his expectations have gone with the wind due to the girl's betrayal.

The subway accident is Damon's new chance to conquer another world, a new chance to escape from the chaos around him. His first move was to recreate his self and then shape it in accordance with his own beliefs. This greedy self, which is alienated from the whole world, seeks

power to dominate its new sphere of existence. The source of this power that supplies it is internal; a strong will for change. Likewise, Cross Damon says, “There was 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...”²⁴⁴ In other words, when he escapes to a new world in New York, he decides to establish his own dream world in the ashes of the old, corrupt world. In this regard, he inaugurates himself as a ‘little God’ who has the supreme power to remodel the world to fit into his ideal vision. Moreover, he never believes in his criminality since he is convinced that any God has the power to end the life of any unethical soul. Hence, the murder of the two communist leaders, the fascist, and Joe is out of his conviction that they never deserve “the right to exist”²⁴⁵ since they are intruders to his dream world, to his inner perfect world. Hence, he creates his own laws to replace the illegal ones that regulate the outer world and then imposes them on the people around him.²⁴⁶ He simply aims to exist “beyond good and evil”²⁴⁷.

Native Son and *The Outsider* vocalize the Strangers’ absurd conflict between their self-estrangement, communal alienation, and their desire to escape the pain of alienation to a more authentic space. This conflict constitutes the absurdity of the black man’s existence, which Richard Wright attempts to expose to the entire world through his fiction. While the following section is also an endeavor to explore the McCarthian vision in *The Road* and *Suttree*.

2. The McCarthian Alternative Space in *Suttree* and *The Road*

²⁴⁴ Wright, *The Outsider*, 75.

²⁴⁵ Floyd, “The Paradox of the Ethical Criminal in Richard Wright’s Novel *The Outsider*,” 170.

²⁴⁶ Floyd, “The Paradox of the Ethical Criminal in Richard Wright’s Novel *The Outsider*,” 169.

²⁴⁷ Floyd, “The Paradox of the Ethical Criminal in Richard Wright’s Novel *The Outsider*,” 169.

Suttree and *The Road* reveal the McCarthyian perception of the alternative space that the stranger takes in an attempt to escape the burden of alienation that defines his world as absurd and regain his ruined self. In this regard, nature sneaks into his works, as seen with Wright's *Native Son*, to be the first refuge of the protagonist, where he can feel his self-existence and isolate himself from the chaos of social life. In fact, nature has always been an important symbol in American literature since the early writings of the Puritans. Then with Romanticism, it acquires its holiness, and it becomes man's outlet through which he regains his inner balance. Thus, McCarthy and Wright escape to nature to heal the wounds created by a lost sense of self and communal alienation.

First of all, *Suttree* demonstrates the McCarthyian vision of the symbolism of nature. First and foremost, as previously stated in the preceding sections, our stranger suffers from self-estrangement and family problems that have driven him into the abyss. He is sucked into an existential vortex that requires a quick move for recovery. Hence, *Suttree* escapes to the river in order to reconstruct his self. He is in need of the peace that the immensity of nature grants to the sick soul. The decision to leave the bourgeois lifestyle and the community it represents to reside in a houseboat is due to the keen desire to create his own space where he is the dominant power. He, therefore, frees himself from all ethics and the conventions of the old society and prefers to live in harmony with nature and with his self by settling near the river and working as a fisherman in an attempt to "[puts] life to the test, requiring, or allowing, it to prove its worth on its own terms"²⁴⁸ As Bell Vereen suggests.

Cormac McCarthy, unlike Richard Wright, highlights man's ambivalence towards communal life in the text at hand. In fact, this critical side we do not really identify in Wright's

²⁴⁸Vareen, *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy*, 72.

The Outsider and *Native Son*. However, McCarthy makes this perception clear through the protagonist Suttree. Initially, though McCarthy's main character flees into his chosen space of existence, he is sometimes manipulated by the human instinct of being with the other. Similarly, though he may seem to have taken a similar path to the one chosen by Wright's strangers who escape to the world of sensation in a quest for self-recovery, his journey quite differs from theirs. Thus, Suttree's relationship with Wanda, the daughter of his mussel hunter partner, and the prostitute Joyce is an attempt to establish a new social and familial space for himself because of the void left by the death of his twin brother.²⁴⁹ Likewise, Suttree's efforts to escape alienation end in tragedy, with both Wanda and Joyce, and he is once again in a direct confrontation with nature. In other words, he decides to isolate himself in the mountains of Gatlinburg. Suttree's association with nature, especially the mountain, is interpreted by Guerra as a way of "integrating himself in the schemes of nature, Suttree takes a beating from nature and rediscovers all of the ways he does not belong... it is as though Suttree must reduce himself to nothing in order to begin reassembling his life."²⁵⁰ So, this newly inhabited space reinforces the sense of alienation in Suttree's heart, but it quenches his thirst for inner peace. Eventually, through all the experiences that Suttree went through, he wins the fight against his past pain and learns to value his self and disregard the whole world. Thus, the novel ends with Suttree leaving the river, his houseboat, the community of the outcast people, the mountains, his family, and all that he has once established, and "He'd taken for talisman the simple human heart within him"²⁵¹ in search for a new sphere of existence where he can start over again with the new vision he gains about himself.

²⁴⁹ Guerra, "Suttree's Absurd Revolt," 166.

²⁵⁰ Guerra, "Suttree's Absurd Revolt," 154.

²⁵¹ McCarthy, *Suttree*, 581.

Secondly, *The Road* tackles the concept from a different angle. To start with, the post-apocalypse enforces its logic on the survivors and their reality as well. Thus, the strangers' quest for self-definition leads them to pursue freedom and security on the road itself. In other words, the journey to the South is the project of their existence, which may be achieved by taking the road. Hence, from the opening of the novel, we are informed that the road is the first space chosen by the protagonists as the narrator reported that "With the first gray light, he rose and left the boy sleeping and walked out to the road and squatted and studied the country to the south. Barren, silent, godless. [...] They were moving south. There'd be no surviving another winter here."²⁵² In opposition to what has been previously stated about the other strangers, the selected space is a safe haven where they feel their existence, but with the strangers of *The Road*, things are different. Their first space -the road- is a necessity for their safety because the city is no longer a secure shelter. Even the road itself is not a safe space because it is also the destination of other intruders, or as McCarthy calls them, "the Bad guys"²⁵³. On the other hand, nature interferes to be the protagonists' outlet. Since the journey to the South requires supplies and physical strength, the strangers escape into an alternative space where they can satisfy their needs: food, rest, and safety. Accordingly, the wilderness is given the features of the home; it is the space where they are warm, safe, and their biological needs are fulfilled, as the narrator informs us that "There were fires still burning high in the mountains [...] It was getting colder, but they had campfires all night and left them burning behind them when they set out again in the morning."²⁵⁴ These lines allude to the warm, intimate moments that people have at home on rainy winter days. Also, the wilderness is the place where the self assures its dominance while being alienated from the external forces that threaten its supremacy. Conversely, McCarthy, once again

²⁵² McCarthy, *The Road*, 4.

²⁵³ McCarthy, *The Road*, 65.

²⁵⁴ McCarthy, *The Road*, 26.

in *The Road*, emphasizes the fact that nature is a temporary space and man needs to take another direction to create an authentic space for himself. So, like Suttree, who left the mountains and his houseboat to seek other opportunities in a new place, the father and his son leave the woods to return to the road because it is the way to their goal.

The third space that is inhabited by strangers is the sea or the ocean. The sea first appears to be one of the goals of the journey southward. It is described by McCarthy as “an alien sea”²⁵⁵ because it is no longer the same, which makes the father apologize to his son because “it is not blue, he said. That’s okay, said the boy.”²⁵⁶ So, this “mythical space”²⁵⁷ as Tascón Olmedo refers to is deprived of its significance to be senseless and a source of disappointment. Moreover, the protagonists leave the sea to continue their trip to the South because they believe that they do not belong to that world since it does not differ from their homeland which is gray, senseless, and devastated. Lastly, *The Road’s* epilogue alludes to *Suttree’s*. In other words, the denouement in *Suttree* shows the protagonist leaving his city and friends, taking “the simple human heart within him”²⁵⁸ to search for a new, authentic space for his ruined self. Equally, *The Road* represents the orphan boy “carrying the fire”²⁵⁹ of his dead father to the South in pursuit of an authentic space of existence.

To conclude, Cormac McCarthy’s strangers in *Suttree* and *The Road* attempt to escape their inner crises and sense of communal isolation into an alternative universe where the alien self seeks dominance. Both novels represent strangers on the move in the quest for an authentic space of existence. Eventually, McCarthy’s and Wright’s novels reveal certain affinities and differences

²⁵⁵ McCarthy, *The Road*, 181.

²⁵⁶ McCarthy, *The Road*, 181.

²⁵⁷ Tascón Olmedo, “A Post-Apocalyptic Redefinition of Space,” 137.

²⁵⁸ McCarthy, *Suttree*, 581.

²⁵⁹ McCarthy, *The Road*, 70.

in their conceptualization of the characters' escapism into an alternative space as a result of their sense of alienation that might be considered as one of the reactions of the self to the absurd that characterizes its reality. In Wrightian fiction, violence and criminality isolate his outsiders and then make them settle into their mythical land. In other words, violence determines the stranger's escapism into a more authentic space of existence, which is a reaction to their suffering. On the other hand, Cormac McCarthy suggests that though his strangers may be a part of a violent environment that has pushed them to escape from it to an imaginative world, the desire to create meaning to a meaningless universe and reconstruct oneself comes from the inside. To put it another way, he suggests that the absurd never ends by escapism, but to value the self as a whole entity and disregard the outer environment, then take a new path, may be a better choice. This new path is the strangers' way to the freedom of choice and revolt; to face the absurd, as it will be discussed in the next chapter of the research.

Eventually, the current chapter is an attempt to explore Richard Wright's and Cormac McCarthy's appropriation of the Sartrean-Camusian notion of alienation in *Native Son*, *The Outsider*, *Suttree*, and *The Road*. It is, therefore, divided into three parts. The first examines the Wrightian-McCarthyian perception of the concept of self-alienation. The analysis reveals that McCarthy's strangers are the victims of self-deception and self-definition due to the chaos of post-modern life, an illusory reality that estranges man from himself and drives him into the abyss. While Wright's black outsiders fight for their self-assertion and reject the socially imposed restrictions of the white racist society on the self, and call for a relocation of the black self in modern America. Though McCarthy and Wright handle the concept differently, each with a distinctive vision, they both agree on the fact that man is trapped in living an absurd life and is stuck in an existential dilemma. Additionally, the second part explores the way the strangers'

inner troubles lead them to alienate themselves from any communal gatherings. This social alienation is a direct consequence of feelings of strangeness and invisibility. On the other side, the last part is devoted to the examination of the outsiders' alternative space to the one they escaped from. This alternative space is, in fact, one of the ways to heal the shattered self and to feel one's existence, but this comfort zone offers a temporary solace that never ends the suffering of strangers because it reinforces their sense of estrangement. Hence, it is the concern of the following chapter to demonstrate the way these strangers choose to revolt and the way they overcome their dread and leave their comfort zones to demonstrate another reaction to the absurdity of their lives.

CHAPTER TWO:

**BETWEEN SUICIDE, FREEDOM OF CHOICE, AND REVOLT PARADIGMS: THE
REBIRTH OF THE FREE SELF IN THE NOVELS OF WRIGHT AND MCCARTHY**

One can never go through a novel that questions the issue of existence without identifying suicide, with all its forms, as one of the main themes of the narrative. Within the existential context, suicide, be it physical in the form of voluntary death or philosophical in terms of escaping to religion seeking inner comfort, is inseparable from the concept of revolt initiated by Camus and Sartre's concept of freedom of choice. Therefore, the present chapter explores the way the Wrightian-McCarthyian characters react to the absurdity of their life or how the absurd is first perceived and then influences their reactions. In other words, emphasis is put on studying the impacts that the death of the self may lead to the rebirth of a free, rebellious self, which raises the challenge to defeat the absurd by asserting its freedom of choice and creating a purpose to its existence as it revolts against its reality. So, the primary goal of this part of the research is to argue for the reincarnation of a new self that fights for its freedom and seeks to impose its own laws on the absurd world.

The current part of the study attempts to answer two main questions: Does the absurd end with the death of the self? How do death or suicide of the mind and the self engender a sense of revolt within oneself and in other selves? How can the practice of freedom of choice generate the birth of a free new self amidst the chaos of the age? So, these questions determine the general structure of the chapter. In other words, the first part of the chapter explores the theme of suicide in both forms in the selected works of Wright and McCarthy. The second aims to examine the concepts of revolt and the freedom of choice as the only possible reactions that may end the absurdity of life as proposed by the two Southern American writers in *Native Son*, *The Outsider*, *Suttree*, and *The Road*.

I. Suicide: A Paradise in Disguise in Wright's and McCarthy's Novels

Suicide is a complex psychological turmoil that expresses an inner struggle between a man and himself, which, eventually, ends with self-destruction. Williams, in his *Cry of Pain: Understanding suicide and self-harm*, explains that every suicidal act is nothing more than an expression of the sense of entrapment in unbearable and inescapable stressful conditions.²⁶⁰ Accordingly, Susan A. Rasmussen et al interpret Williams' perspective as an escapist act from a situation that has made suicidal emotions strong enough to control the individual's behaviors.²⁶¹ In a similar vein, Roy F. Baumeister's perception of the concept is also based on the idea of escapism. He, in fact, considers suicide and self-awareness as two sides of the same coin.²⁶² This means that when the self becomes aware of all the negative experiences and life wounds, then such a reality becomes painful.²⁶³ It is at this level that suicide can be seen as an attempt to escape self-awareness as well as the world.²⁶⁴ This psychological explanation of suicide does not differ a lot from the views of the existentialists: Camus and Sartre. Both reject suicide and consider it a cowardly act since it is a form of escapism from oneself and the absurdity of human life. The former goes a step further to enlist two different types of suicide -physical and philosophical- as the present part of the study aims to elucidate not only in theory, but a projection of the notion is suggested through a literary analysis of the four texts of R. Wright and C. McCarthy.

Suicide, either physical or philosophical, is the theme that binds the selected works of Wright and McCarthy. Though it is highlighted by some critics in the works of McCarthy,

²⁶⁰Williams J. Mark G, *Cry of Pain: Understanding suicide and self-harm* (London: Penguin Books1997), 66.

²⁶¹ Susan A Rasmussen et al, "Elaborating the Cry of Pain model of suicidality: Testing a psychological model in a sample of first-time and repeat self-harm patients," *British Journal of Clinical Psychology*, (2010): 3.

²⁶² Roy F. Baumeister, "Suicide as Escape From Self," *Psychological Review* 97, no. 1 (1990): 90.

²⁶³ Baumeister, "Suicide as Escape From Self," 90.

²⁶⁴ Baumeister, "Suicide as Escape From Self," 90.

especially in *The Road*, the Wrightian scholarship knows scarcity in the criticism dealing with the concept. If we consider, for instance, *Native Son*, physical death is the only form of death that takes the lion's share in the criticism released in the field. Scholarly works make it obvious that this theme cannot be dealt with in isolation from the concept of violence due to the nature of the novel itself. In other words, most of what has been written, in this regard, sheds light on the way the socio-political reality generates violent Blacks that, undoubtedly, results in the sneaking of criminality into the Afro-American mindset. This perspective is similar to the one proposed by Robert Felgar, whose analysis of the nature of the narrative's protagonist -Bigger Thomas- reveals his critique of the Whites, whom he describes as the real 'beasts' due to their responsibility for the birth of the new Bigger: a serial killer who has lost his humanity in the white man's jungle.²⁶⁵ On the other hand, Sheldon perceives the crimes of Wright's character as a mere act of self-destruction since he is burdened by a suicidal consciousness that has, eventually, driven him to the threshold of death.²⁶⁶ So, Wright considers physical death as the solution to silence the Afro-Americans and contain their anger, which is sometimes expressed in their violent crimes against the Whites. While the ideas he discussed in the *Outsider* came to prove his philosophical stance to the readers. Accordingly, Amritjit Singh, who confesses Wright's existential tone in the work, claims that the violent response of his characters must be understood as a practice of their existentialist choices.²⁶⁷

²⁶⁵ Robert Felgar, "The Kingdom of the Beast" The Landscape of "Native Son," *LA Journal* 17, no. 3 (March 1974): 336, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44329059>

²⁶⁶ Brivic Sheldon, "Conflict of Values: Richard Wright's "Native Son," *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 7, no. 3 (1974): 235, doi.org/10.2307/1345415

²⁶⁷ Amritjit Singh, "Richard Wright's *The Outsider*: Existentialist Exemplar Or Critique?," *CIA Journal* 27, no. 4 (June 1984): 365, www.jstor.org/stable/44318060

However, we noticed that almost all philosophical interpretations given to both novels came from the analysis of the protagonists' attitudes, morals, and beliefs, while reference to minor personas is only in the cases where needed to support ideas stated about the main character. Therefore, this part of the study does not only suggest an innovative reading of philosophical suicide in both works by analyzing three minor characters from both texts but also aims to expose the juxtaposition Wright established by comparing the reactions of both types of personas to the absurd to prove the rebirth of the new self.

Within the McCarthyian scholarship, Frank Shelton's and Elijah Guerra's views are significant to this research since they have argued for Suttree's desire to commit suicide. While Shelton emphasized the ambivalence of the protagonist toward suicide, highlighting his lack of commitment²⁶⁸, Guerra's analysis suggests an existentialist reading of the novel. It is on this ground that the chapter approaches the work at hand as it seeks to bring to light other details that Shelton and Guerra have not discussed. Moreover, the philosophical perspective that *Suttree* discloses is evident in *The Road* as well. McCarthy inserts a whole scene about the suicide of a character named 'the mother', which has been analyzed by critics from different angles. Allan Chavkin and Nancy Feyl Chavkin shifted their intention to what McCarthy had written in the early draft of the novel entitled *The Grail*. However, a study based on a version to which readers are not familiar with, can be significant only when it is founded on a comparative discourse of the two versions. Following Vereen's claim of nihilism in the works of McCarthy, as he refers to the suicide scene of the female character, Lydia Cooper, Bueno Laguarda Carmen, and others, confess the dominance of a nihilist

²⁶⁸Frank Shelton, "Suttree and Suicide," *Southern Quarterly* 29, no. 1(1990) quoted in Elijah Guerra, "Nothingness is Not a Curse" Suttree's Absurd Revolt," *The Cormac McCarthyJournal* 17, no. 2 (2019): 154, doi: 10.5325/Cormmccaj.17.2.0148

tone in the work. Hence, the present part investigates all these details within the context of its theoretical framework.

1. The Wrightian Paradigm of Philosophical Suicide in *Native Son*

Richard Wright's cultural background manifests itself in his artistic creation, offering us one of the most authentic images of a black man's suffering under the Jim Crow regime. Wright, the black writer, knows how it feels to live under the mercy of white Americans just to preserve the littlest right of any creature; to exist. Hence, the fictional universe and even the characters created in his literary texts echo his own reality and its people which is revealed in his autobiography: *The Black Boy*. Therefore, his works divulge a juxtaposition between the way his people react to a senseless, chaotic life and his own vision. In other words, the submissive self that surrenders to its meaningless existence is put in opposition to the rebellious self, which challenges its fate and chooses to pursue happiness within the absurd.

This submissiveness is extensively discussed through two characters: Mrs. Thomas, Bigger's mother, and Bessie. However, the way Wright approaches the concept of self-destruction -suicide- differs from the perspective that will be discussed in the McCarthian novels. The Afro-American writer throws light on another dimension of voluntary death: philosophical suicide with the two female characters.

To launch the theoretical perspective of this concept, one needs to know that the term first appears in *The Myth of Sisyphus* by Camus. The latter elucidates that form of suicide through a critical examination of other existential scholars' views of the absurd. What the French thinker

calls “philosophical suicide” is predominantly a critique of other escapist forms of the absurd suggested by Chestov and Kierkegaard. Though all of them find that human life is meaningless, the proposed visions to transcend that absurdity oppose the Camusian perception of the concept. In this regard, Leo Chestov suggests an escapist view that allows man to free himself “from the rational illusions”²⁶⁹ of life and to fulfill his desire for truth beyond his drastic reality. He, therefore, believes that man turns to God seeking “only to obtain the impossible”²⁷⁰. But what requires careful consideration is that the Russian existentialist “discovers the fundamental absurdity of all existence, he does not say: “This is the absurd,” but rather: “This is God: we must rely on him even if he does not correspond to any of our rational categories.”²⁷¹ To put it another way, this “spiritual leap”²⁷²-as Camus describes it- puts aside human reason to announce the burst of hope. In a similar vein, the Kierkegaardian vision does not deviate a lot from this stream of thought. The tenets of his philosophy are summed up in *The Myth of Sisyphus* as follows

For him, too, antinomy and paradox become criteria of the religious. Thus, the very thing that led to despair of the meaning and depth of this life now gives it its truth and its clarity. Christianity is the scandal, and what Kierkegaard calls for quite plainly is the third sacrifice [...] the one in which God most rejoices: “The sacrifice of the intellect.”²⁷³

While Chestov assimilates the absurd to God, Kierkegaard considers it the most important criterion of the parallel world. Hence, the journey to attribute meaning to a senseless life necessitates “the sacrifice of the intellect”²⁷⁴ since the mind is impeded by the unsolvable irrationality of the world, which tips the scales in favor of God, as the source of clarity and

²⁶⁹ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, Trans. Justin O’Brien (New York: Random House, 1955), 24.

²⁷⁰ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 24

²⁷¹ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 24.

²⁷² Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 39.

²⁷³ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 26.

²⁷⁴ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 26.

meaning. In other words, both Kierkegaard and Chestov call for the destruction of reason and reliance on faith to quench men's thirst for truth and order.

The criticism that Camus directs to Chestov's and Kierkegaard's vision of the absurdity of life starts from his definition of the absurd. Since he believes that the latter is an opposition to the concept of hope. In other words, the absurd, in his sight, never leads to a burst of hope; it rather negates it. This is the main criticism Camus gives to the Chestovian discourse. Whereas, the Kierkegaardian philosophy is seen as a failure since it aims "to escape the antinomy of the human condition."²⁷⁵ Rather than suggesting solutions to it. All in all, the views of these Christian existentialists are a form of suicide of the mind that results in the death of the self since it is manipulated by certain institutions and beliefs that guarantee its submissiveness. Thus, the coinage of the expression "philosophical suicide" is meant to explain this reaction to the absurd. Though we do not encounter this expression in the Sartrean doctrine, the fundamentals of the idea constitute the essence of his discourse. He advocates that the belief in God is a form of escaping the responsibility and the anxiety that accompany human freedom. Hence, it is a form of illusion. Therefore, Sartre agrees with Camus that it is not through religion that man can find a purpose in life, but it is the human reason that creates the person and directs him toward other possibilities in his existence. He also criticizes the Christian existentialists' reaction to the senselessness of human existence. It is on this common ground that we handle the selected corpus.

These theoretical ideas are important tools that will help to understand and then explain the way this form of voluntary death appears in the novel at hand. Moreover, the first female character the reader encounters, in the opening scene of the narrative, is Mrs. Thomas. The scene is constructed to inform us about the harshness of life and the suffering of Blacks in white

²⁷⁵ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 26.

American society. So, living in alienation from the sociopolitical life with limited access to education and few chances for jobs is what defines the torment of Blacks. The life of the Thomas family divulges the pain and the suffering that Black people endure just to preserve their right to exist. Richard Wright shows that life in a one-room apartment shared with rats and being responsible for feeding three children is a heavy burden for a woman like Mrs. Thomas. The unbearable misery of her present-day life makes her burst into tears each time she thinks about future suffering as revealed in the opening scene. Mrs. Thomas says

“Lord, I get so tired of this I don’t know what to do,” her voice floated plaintively from behind the curtain. “All I ever do is try to make a home for you children and to don’t care.”

[...] “sometime I just want to lay down and quit.”

[...] “I can’t last more years, living like this.”²⁷⁶

The lamentation over her doomed fate externalizes the buried feelings of dread over the senselessness of her life, since suffering never leads to happiness, but rather ruins it. This is what justifies her desire for physical suicide when she tells her daughter that she “just want[s] to lay down and quit”²⁷⁷ since death is perceived as a relief or a better way to end her absurd existence. This declaration is out of her realization that she is not able to bear more suffering, so death is an outlet for her. However, Wright reveals the change in the character’s thinking when he demonstrates that the old dark ideas soon vanished due to the mother’s Christian leanings. This change might be first traced in the episode where she appears “singing behind the curtain. *Lord, I want to be a Christian, In my heart, In my heart, Lord, I want to be a Christian, In my heart, In*

²⁷⁶Richard Wright, *Native Son* (New York: Harper Collins e-books, 2009), 20.

²⁷⁷Wright, *Native Son*, 20.

my heart....”²⁷⁸ [italics original]. These words mark a shift in her thinking; the transition from physical suicide to philosophical suicide. In other words, the absurdity of suffering, which once led her to think about death, drives her to another form of escapism. To put it another way, the acceptance of suffering in life is one way to guarantee happiness in the afterlife for the faithful believers. So, this suffering is what gives life its meaning and value. Hence, the selection of the verse that Mrs. Thomas sings, “*Lord, I want to be a Christian, In my heart, In my heart,*”²⁷⁹ divulges her desire to be a true Christian in order to be rewarded by her Lord with happiness in the afterlife. This perception is once again reinforced late in the narrative when she says

Lord, here we is, maybe for the last time. You gave me these children, Lord, and told me to raise ’em. If I failed, Lord, I did the best I could. (*Ahmen!*) These poor children’s been with me a long time and they’ s all I got. Lord, please let me see ‘em after the sorrow and suffering of this world! (*Hear her lawd!*) Lord, please let me see ‘em where I can love ‘em in peace. Let me see ‘em beyond the grave! (*Have mercy, Jesus!*) You said You’d heed prayer, Lord, and I’m asking this in the name of Your son.²⁸⁰ [Italics original]

The excerpt shows the belief of Mrs. Thomas in the reward after suffering. It is simply the sacrifice of the mind seeking eternal happiness and peace in the afterlife through faith in God, which announces the submission of the self to the Whites aggression in the name of religion. This perspective is evident through her prayers to God, asking to grant her the chance to love her children peacefully in heaven. Thus, she chooses to escape to religion in order to find the lost meaning of her absurd existence. This is, literally, “the sacrifice of the intellect”²⁸¹ that

²⁷⁸ Wright, *Native Son*, 40.

²⁷⁹ Wright, *Native Son*, 40.

²⁸⁰ Wright, *Native Son*, 236.

²⁸¹ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 26.

Kierkegaard exposes and which Camus and Sartre denounce. It is “the leap” of faith that considers “the absurd as sin without God.”²⁸²

Bessie is the second character through whom Richard Wright establishes the juxtaposition between the two ways man reacts to the absurd: escaping or revolting against it. However, the characterization and the personality traits of Bessie quite differ from those of Mrs. Thomas. In other words, Bigger’s mother escapes from the absurdity of her life to religion as a source of clarity and truth, while Bessie chooses a different path: a path that leads to the same end. To further illustrate this view, it is more pertinent to state the passage where the narrator introduces Bessie before stating any more details

She worked long hours, hard and hot hours seven days a week, with only Sunday afternoons off; and when she did get off she wanted fun, hard and fast fun, something to make her feel that she was making up for the starved life she led. [...] She only wanted to get drunk. She wanted liquor [...] he had heard her complain about how hard the white folks worked her; she had told him over and over again that she lived their lives when she was working in their homes, not her own. That was why, she told him, she drank.²⁸³

This lengthy passage exposes an adaptation of the concept of philosophical suicide that Wright introduces through a black girl named Bessie. Accordingly, this female stands for another type of character who chooses the sacrifice of the self and the mind, not through religion but through alcohol. Moreover, it is the awareness of the meaninglessness of her life that has driven her to the threshold of madness. In other words, suffering becomes a heavy burden that requires to be escaped by any means. Therefore, Bessie’s outlet is liquor, not religion. But they are both similar in a certain way. On the one hand, Christianity silences people with spiritual lies in order to manipulate their minds and kill the rebellious desire to introduce change to the main institutions.

²⁸² Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 28.

²⁸³ Wright, *Native Son*, 119.

It is, however, a tool in the hands of the Whites who “like for us to be religious, then they can do what they want with us,”²⁸⁴ as Bigger declares. On the other hand, liquor has the same effects. It guarantees the submissiveness of the person and the absence of the mind. So, questions are never raised, and rebellion never sees the light. It is this perspective that leads us to suggest that alcohol is another form of philosophical suicide proposed by Wright in this novel. To be back to the above quote –after exposing the link between religion and liquor- we can say that Bessie is not satisfied with her situation and is aware of being exploited when she “complain[s] about how hard the white folks worked her. [...] That was why, she told him, she drank”²⁸⁵. Paradoxically, she chooses not to revolt against this situation by deciding her path, but she prefers to escape from it by drinking alcohol. This submissiveness is, undoubtedly, a philosophical suicide that announces “the negation of the human reason”²⁸⁶ and the burial of the free self. Eventually, both female characters take the same stance. While Mrs. Thomas’s opium is religion, Bessie’s is liquor as illustrated in the narrator’s words, who says that “What his mother had was Bessie’s Whiskey, and Bessie’s Whiskey was his mother’s religion”²⁸⁷. Lastly, as a writer, Wright represents the different reactions to the absurd that he observes in the black society and then offers his own alternative. Such a perspective is reinforced in *The Outsider*.

2. The Quest for Death and Philosophical Suicide of the Damons in *The Outsider*

Wright’s 1953 novel is considered the work that reinforces his Absurdist and existential vision of life. Though many critics regard it “as third-rate, half-baked existentialism and much

²⁸⁴ Wright, *Native Son*, 280.

²⁸⁵ Wright, *Native Son*, 280.

²⁸⁶ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 28.

²⁸⁷ Wright, *Native Son*, 198.

more seriously flawed than *Native Son*²⁸⁸, it tells a lot about the philosophical leaning of the writer that deserves critical consideration. In a similar vein, this text reveals Wright's attempt to use "fiction to express a philosophical point of view."²⁸⁹ In other words, *The Outsider* comes to emphasize -or to theorize- the ideas already declared in *Native Son* and *The Man Who Lived Underground*. So, the concept of suicide in all its forms, voluntary or philosophical, appears once again in the novel at hand as a demonstration of the writer's opposition to his people's reaction to the senselessness of their lives. However, the way he approaches the concepts differs quite from the perspective offered in *Native Son*.

The Wrightian fictionalization of this philosophical view reveals other major issues that might interfere with the decisions that man takes when realizing the absurdity of his existence. Hence, his choice of the character of 'the mother', to elucidate the suicide of the mind and the self as an escapist form of the unbearable existence, is one way to shed light on the influence the Other exerts on the self and life perception. In other words, *The Outsider* does not only emphasize the stance of Mrs. Thomas, from *Native Son*, who adopts the meaning that religion gives to life, but it also demonstrates the way the mother's convictions or submissiveness may shape her children's character as well as attitudes toward their reality. So, this image is a mere representation of the black mother in the southern part of the country.

In *The Outsider*, we find Wright dramatizing the senseless suffering of Mrs. Damon, who is abandoned by her husband and who struggles to endure the pain when realizing that "the gap grew wider. Even before her son was born in 1924, she knew that she was only in his way, a

²⁸⁸Michael F. Lynch, "Haunted by Innocence: The Debate with Dostoevsky in Wright's 'Other Novel' *The Outsider*," *African American Review* 30, no. 2 (Summer, 1996): 255, doi: <https://doi.org/10.2307/3042363>

²⁸⁹Michel Fabre, "Richard Wright and the French Existentialists," (unpublished lecture, Summer Seminar on Richard Wright, University of Iowa, Iowa City, 1971).

worrisome wife. It was then that she took her sorrow and her infant son to God in copious tears.”²⁹⁰ So, suffering has meaning and can only be tolerated when accepting the metaphysical hope God promises to grant to the faithful ones. It is this “Hope[s] that had driven her into the arms of religion [...] she had a refuge [...] she had a balm”²⁹¹. To put it another way, this leap of faith evacuates or eradicates all sorts of revolt in her soul to, eventually, declare the birth of the submissive self and the death of the mind. Therefore, religion is a “refuge” since it helps her to escape from her reality as it enlightens her vision about the lost meaning of her existence. In other words, she believes that it is the “balm” that heals the wounds left by suffering.

Richard Wright sheds light on the impacts of the mother’s convictions in the upbringing of her son, Cross Damon. This issue is highlighted in order to trace and divulge the source of the annihilation of the self and the mind of the black man. In other words, submissiveness, the fear of death, and the Other, which are injected into the child’s mind, not only raise feelings of dread, but also make him a puppet that roams aimlessly in an absurd world. In this regard, Mrs. Damon is represented as “the product of the traditional Christianity in the South that taught black children subservient ethics, tries to mold her son’s character accordingly.”²⁹² Wright informs the reader that Damon’s

First coherent memories had condensed themselves into an image of a young woman whose hysterically loving presence had made his imagination conscious of an invisible God [...]. His adolescent fantasies had symbolically telescoped this God into an awful face shaped in the form of a huge and crushing NO, a terrifying face which had, for a reason he could never learn.²⁹³

²⁹⁰Richard Wright, *The Outsider* (New York: Harper Collins e-books, 1993), 37.

²⁹¹Wright, *The Outsider*, 35.

²⁹²Yoshinobu Hakutani, “Richard Wright’s *The Outsider* and Albert Camus’ *The Stranger*,” *The Mississippi Quarterly* 42, no. 4 (Fall 1989): 371, doi: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26475143>

²⁹³Wright, *The Outsider*, 33.

This private world, where little Damon lives, is saturated with the old pains of his wretched mother. The passage reveals the emphasis that Wright aims to put on the buried feelings of Damon that were bitterly influenced by his mother's religious convictions. However, the boy's consciousness of the presence of God in his life generates the dread that manipulates him and makes him draw a scary face of the indiscernible God who is the master of the world.

Richard Wright, therefore, shows that such an upbringing inherits submissiveness. In other words, obsession with death, whatever its form is, is hereditary. The opening scene of the novel informs us about the protagonist's inner dilemma which, lastly, leads him to fall into the arms of despair. Wright, however, directs our attention to the fact that the character receives higher education, which makes him aware of the absurdity of his existence. This awareness is, in fact, what justifies his addiction to reading books because he seeks answers to his inquiries about the reality he confronts. And it is through a discussion with Booker, Pink, and Joe- Damon's friends- that Wright informs us about such details. Booker first says

"I could hardly get into the door! Big book, little books, book piled everywhere he even had books in bed with 'im" [...] man, in the clothes closet: books. In the bathroom: books. Under the bed: books." [...]

"I was looking for something," Cross said quietly.

[...] "Did you find it," Joe asked.

"No."»²⁹⁴

Since the world of words and philosophy is the first source for any intellectual to pursue knowledge, Damon sinks deeper into it seeking an explanation of the chaos that constitutes his

²⁹⁴ Wright, *The Outsider*, 23.

life. In other words, the failure of the mind to explain reality or to categorize “the irrational”²⁹⁵ leads him to books. So, Damon was looking for something that he did not know. But what guides his research is this irrationality that he fails to understand. However, the truth he gains about life makes him conscious of his cowardice, and when he is asked about the reason that makes him turn his back on those books, Damon replies, “I’ve put away childish things [...] I’m not going to bother you with my troubles.”²⁹⁶ To put it another way, the awareness of the absurdity of life, in addition to the inherited ethics, makes him wallow in inner conflict to eventually constitute a nihilistic perception of life. Camus describes this situation saying that “The mind, when it reaches its limits, must make a judgment and choose its conclusions. This is where suicide and the reply stand.”²⁹⁷ Hence, before going into the details of Damon’s attempt to commit suicide, we should highlight an important point about the above quote. The passage reveals a new style in narration that Wright relies on in *The Outsider* if compared with his previous literary productions. The first-person narration is his choice to explore the character’s mind and feelings. Wright says about this decision the following “I felt that I ought to write my novel in the first person [...] I felt that there was a certain note of poignancy missing which a first-person note would supply.”²⁹⁸ Therefore, the first-person point of view is the best choice to disclose the troubles of the self and the plight of the mind.

Damon’s dissatisfaction with life, in addition to the realization of his powerless position, led him to the threshold of suicide. Wright relies on drinking alcohol and starvation to demonstrate the escapist form his character chooses. In other words, he attempts to elucidate that Damon does not follow the same path as his mother, but he chooses an alternative to her religion:

²⁹⁵ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 19.

²⁹⁶ Wright, *The Outsider*, 23.

²⁹⁷ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 19.

²⁹⁸ Fabre, “Richard Wright and the French Existentialists,” 41.

a voluntary physical death. This decision is primarily due to the terror aroused because of the presence of God in his childhood, as we have seen earlier. Thus, he takes the other way around. The point that we have to note is that Wright, in the opening scene of the narrative, aims to make us associate Damon with death. The following discussion further explains this perception

“Jeeesus! Your fingers’re cold as *snakes!*” Pink gasped, his eyes lit with concern. “They ought to call you *Mr. Death!*”

“I just need some alcohol” Cross confessed grimly. “My old engine won’t run without it.” [...] “When you start *living* on alcohol, you’re traveling a road that ain’t got no turning” [...] “My soul needs it” Cross mumbled.

“Makes you feel better, hunh?” Booker asked.

“No. Makes me feel *less*,” Cross corrected him.²⁹⁹ [Emphasis original]

The attitudes of Damon lead his friends to call him ‘*Mr. Death*’: a name written in italics to make us realize that death is the character’s utmost desire. Thus, the absurd leads Damon to consider death as a relief from his pain and a cure to his soul, and this is the hint he gives when he declares the need of his soul to alcohol, so he chooses not to get a wink of sleep, to starve, bear the cold weather, and drink alcohol to approach his end. Moreover, such a nihilistic perception of life makes suffering meaningless, life gloomier, and leads him to a slow death through alcohol and starvation. In other words, Damon eradicates his self, body, and mind to fall into the arms of death. This desire is made known to his friends when he responds to their questions by saying, “My liver’s in the death house,” Cross admitted. [...] “If he keeps up that drinking, he won’t have no mind left” Joe said emphatically. “And it’ll kill ‘im” “All right,” Cross said darkly. “Do I want to live forever?”³⁰⁰ These words reveal his mind and express his rejection of life. Similarly, Wright’s famous critic Michel Fabre suggests that Damon “drinks in order to escape the hell

²⁹⁹ Wright, *The Outsider*, 20-21.

³⁰⁰ Wright, *The Outsider*, 25.

generated by his own thoughts. It is the nights that he finds unbearable [...] the waste and futility of his existence”³⁰¹ that have led him to nihilism. However, the latter first infiltrates into his mind because he was raised and taught that change can never take place in his life, and as he grows up, the awareness of the absurdity of life convinces him that death is the only way out. On the other hand, the next section aims to disclose the way McCarthy approaches the concept in his *Suttree* and *The Road*.

1. The Trap of Nothingness: Suttree and Suicide

McCarthy’s fourth novel reveals a notable difference in dealing with the issue of suicide or death in more general terms. Therefore, the juxtaposition, which he establishes in *The Road* between the two types of characters to demonstrate the impacts of death on the self and the way the former may consequently lead to the birth of the will for an authentic life in other selves, is all replaced by the ambivalent nature of one main character: Suttree. The narrative’s protagonist exemplifies a more realistic representation of the confrontation between man and death and the way this confrontation leads to the awareness of the necessity of revolt against that absurd existence.

Due to an emotional tie to Knoxville, McCarthy selected the McAnally Flats to be the arena where the ubiquity of death is man’s first enemy. Initially, the novel’s prologue divulges the 1950s dark image of the city. It, therefore, leads to the construction of a gloomy vision of life in “*the interstitial wastes*”³⁰² [Italics original]. The McCarthian representation of Knoxville is aesthetically distinctive and historically realistic, as stated that “*This city constructed on no known paradigm, a mongrel architecture [...] A carnival of shapes up reared on the river plain*

³⁰¹Fabre, “Richard Wright and the French Existentialists,” 18.

³⁰² Cormac McCarthy, *Suttree* (New York: Random House, 1992), 7.

that has dried up the sap of the earth for miles about”³⁰³ [Italics original]. Hence, the prologue invites us to the city of chaos and silence; the land of the wretched shadows. In other words, the narrator intentionally evokes feelings of strangeness to inform the reader that the world he is entering is not a usual one. It is, therefore, an odd city that is haunted by an unknown visitor who conjures dread in the hearts of the drunk, the homeless, and the bourgeois residents. This wasteland is “*Beset by a thing unknown and will it come from forest or sea? The murengers have walled the pale, the gates are shut, but lo the thing’s inside [...] a carder of souls from the world’s nap? Or a hunter with hounds or do bone horses draw his dead cart through the streets and does he call his trade to each? Dear friend he is not to be dwelt upon*”³⁰⁴ [Italics original]. This metaphorical image constructed for the visitor of the city or what McCarthy refers to as “the Pale” alludes to *death*. The latter is the hunter of the shuttered selves which surrender to the absurd and then welcome the guest “*from the world’s nap*”³⁰⁵. Knoxville is plagued by an unknown fear, a threat of death that frightens the city dwellers. McCarthy’s description of the atmosphere echoes Camus’s Oran, where the omnipresence of death threatens man’s existence and manipulates his reaction to the absurdity of life. Hence, the dominance of the self is shaken when the first germ of dread sneaks into it, then its Being becomes meaningless. And as humanity is doomed to suffering in addition to the futility of life with its mechanical aspect, man may become a nihilist when surrendering to the absurd. Hence, the environment where the self exists determines its openness to life. In other words, embracing death by committing suicide or rebelling against the absurd by creating a project in life all depend on the impacts that the external factors of life or the absurd forms have left on the self. Thus, to approach Suttree’s self

³⁰³ McCarthy, *Suttree*, 6.

³⁰⁴ McCarthy, *Suttree*, 7.

³⁰⁵ McCarthy, *Suttree*, 7.

and examine his attitudes toward the absurd, an analysis of the environment where he lives is required to trace the source of influence.

Suttree chooses to reside by the Tennessee River in a houseboat and live on what the river offers to him. However, death has also haunted that space, creating from it a tomb rather than a dreamland. It is represented as an abandoned area where the dead once lodged. It is a dead world where *“The river, the mud delated and baring out of its rich alluvial harbored bones and dread waste, a wrack of cratewood and condoms and fruitrinds. Old tins and jars and ruined household artifacts [...] A world beyond all fantasy, [...] and now and again the beached and stinking forms of foetal humans bloated like young birds mooneyed and bluish or stale gray”*³⁰⁶[Italics original] Suttree’s new dwelling is different; it is a parallel world with all aspects that discern it. Similarly, these tins, jars, and fruit rinds constitute this wasteland. It is mainly what the narrator describes as a *“World within a world”*³⁰⁷. This aesthetic representation of the polluted river is loaded with intrinsic connotations of death. Hence, words like “stinking”, “bloated”, “bluish”, and “bones” indicate that the Tennessee River is no longer a source of life since very few creatures can survive in it except Catfish. It is, in fact, “a mixture of life and death”³⁰⁸ as suggested by O’Connor. Therefore, McCarthy informs the reader right from the prologue that death is omnipresent in the protagonist’s life, and the narrative’s events reveal its impacts on Suttree’s self, which are expressed in his reaction to the senselessness of life. In other words, this absurd life, where death is always in sight, leads the character to be obsessed with suicidal thoughts.

³⁰⁶ McCarthy, *Suttree*, 6.

³⁰⁷ McCarthy, *Suttree*, 7.

³⁰⁸ Patrick O’Connor, “Literature and Death: McCarthy, Blanchot and *Suttree*,” in *Cormac McCarthy, Philosophy and the Physics of the Damned* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022), 44.

After the italicized prologue, the narrative opens with the retrieval of a suicide's body from the Tennessee River, which reinforces the temporality of humans in life for Cornelius Suttree³⁰⁹. It is, however, a scene that is chosen to support the ideas that the prologue first carries. In a similar vein, McCarthy's choice of such a scene initiates the feelings of dread and anxiety that seem to possess his main character. Accordingly, McCarthy exposes through his persona the main absurdist issue: Is this life worth living? In other words, *Suttree* echoes a certain absurdist leaning in the McCarthian perception of human existence. Hence, the suicide victim in the exposition alludes to Suttree's association with suicide.

As we have seen in the previous chapter, the protagonist, Suttree, is aware of the absurdity of his existence, which is manifested in the presence of death in his life. This, eventually, leads him to be estranged from his self and even from his people or social belonging. Hence, this sense of estrangement influences his life perception. Consequently, the flames of inner struggle gnaw at his determination to fight for survival. Subsequently, McCarthy's vision of the absurd is exposed through the ambivalent nature of Suttree toward his absurd life. Accordingly, the characterization of the protagonist varies between submission, which is the concern of the current section of the chapter, and rebellion, which will be discussed in the second section. In this regard, Bell Vereen describes the characterization of Cornelius Suttree as "a new character in McCarthy's work because he brings a new order of experience to McCarthy's new, more complex but still recognizable fictional world."³¹⁰ On the other hand, embracing death and being obsessed with suicidal thoughts in order to draw an end to senseless suffering is Suttree's *first* reaction to face the absurd. Lastly, annihilating the self is a choice imposed on Suttree by the ridiculous existence

³⁰⁹ O'Connor, "Literature and Death," 38.

³¹⁰ Bell M. Vereen, "Death and Affirmation: *Suttree*," in *Achievements of Cormac McCarthy* (Baton Rouge: LSUP: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), 72.

that prevents him from living an authentic life, and he eventually adopts it due to the feelings of estrangement.

Suicide sneaks into Suttree's mind as a result of the feelings of dread of death, which manipulate his thinking. Thus, he decides to cancel "the mood of anxiety and silence the call of 'nothingness' to his self"³¹¹ by assessing the possibility of annihilating it through death. To illustrate, the scene where Suttree appears on the bridge of Knoxville best elucidates this perception. The narrator says, "Downstream recurving shore currents chased in deckle light wave on wave like silver spawn. To fall through the dark to darkness. Struggle in those opaque and fecal deeps, which way is up. Till the lungs suck brown sewage and funny lights go down the final corridors of the brain, small watchmen to see that all is quiet for the advent of eternal night."³¹² These words reveal the impact that the suicide act of the man who appears at the beginning of the narrative has left on his self³¹³. This interpretation is consistent with his desire to commit suicide from the same bridge by falling into darkness, and then a few watchmen approach the flesh of the liberated soul. Therefore, Suttree's externalization of these repressed emotions divulges his desire to be in the place of the suicide victim whom he met on the return from fishing. So, Suttree's appeal to "eternal night"³¹⁴ voices his desire for ultimate relief or avoidance of the present chaos.

Suttree's suicidal thoughts take him far away to the threshold of nothingness, where he longs to be. This idea dominates his thinking to the point where he wonders, "How would he look in death? For there were days this man so wanted for some end to things that he'd have taken up

³¹¹William Nesbitt Prather, "An Existentialist Reading of the Novels of Cormac McCarthy," (PhD diss., University of Georgia, 2001), 83.

³¹² McCarthy, *Suttree*, 36.

³¹³Prather, "An Existentialist Reading of the Novels of Cormac McCarthy," 83.

³¹⁴ McCarthy, *Suttree*, 36.

his membership among the dead, all souls that ever were, eyes bound with night”³¹⁵. The quote, once again, discloses Suttree’s desire to commit suicide just to join the people to whom he belongs, since he believes that death is the culmination of his present pain. The quest for eternal sleep, or what he describes as “eyes bound with night,”³¹⁶ conforms to the possibility of death as the first move to overcome inauthenticity and liberate his shattered self. This vision is reinforced through the self-perception revealed in the examination of his reflection in mirrors and even water that resembles a dead creature at his sight. Accordingly, McCarthy inserts a scene where Suttree returns from self-exile in the Appalachians to a nearby town, where “He entered the first cafe he came to and sat slowly in a booth. Some stark and darker bearded visage peered back at him from the shiny black formica of the tabletop. Some alien Suttree there among the carven names and rings and smears of other men’s meals”³¹⁷ to emphasize Suttree’s sense of estrangement from the living world and divulge his association with death. The examination of the passage leads us to another dimension of Suttree’s suicidal thought, which is related to his humanness³¹⁸. Indeed, the use of the expression “alien Suttree”³¹⁹ equates him to creatures from another world rather than humans. In fact, such expressions frequently appear in Suttree’s examination of his reflection in mirrors, for instance, while in the terminal, he views “An unshorn ghost in a black beard peered back from the glass with eyes like old furnace flues”³²⁰. Thus, perceiving oneself as an “alien” or a “ghost” is a way of annihilating the human self and an aspect of the absurd expressed in the form of “discomfort in the face of man’s own inhumanity, this incalculable tumble before the image of what we are, this “nausea,” as a writer of today calls

³¹⁵ McCarthy, *Suttree*, 504.

³¹⁶ McCarthy, *Suttree*, 504.

³¹⁷ McCarthy, *Suttree*, 365.

³¹⁸ Prather, “An Existentialist Reading of the Novels of Cormac McCarthy,” 75.

³¹⁹ McCarthy, *Suttree*, 365.

³²⁰ McCarthy, *Suttree*, 368.

it, is also the absurd”³²¹. Hence, this Camusian reflection is apparent in the McCarthyian treatment of the issue.

Suttree’s desire for suicide is not only the result of the absurd existence, but is also related to the feelings of being coupled with death. Correspondingly, McCarthy informs us that his protagonist has a stillborn twin. This incident seems to dominate his life perception. Consequently, Suttree believes that he should have been with his other half, his dead twin, rather than being among the living. However, such a desire is not openly declared, but it either appears in his dreams or hallucinations. In a similar vein, the following excerpts better illustrate this insight

More common visitor. Silent. The infant’s ossature, the thin and brindled bones along whose sulcate facets clove old shreds of flesh and cerements of tattered swaddle. Bones that would no more than fill a shoebox, a bulbous skull. On the right temple a mauve halfmoon. Suttree turned [...] touching a like mark on his own left temple gently with his fingertips. The ordinary of the second son. Mirror image. Gauche carbon.

His fetch come up from life’s other side like anautoscopic hallucination, Suttree and Antisuttree, hand reaching to the hand.³²²

The diction selected to describe the dream in the first quote carries an enormous amount of sadness, which Suttree fails to bear in the living world. He, in fact, pities the death of his brother. McCarthy alludes to Suttree’s obsession with the dead twin when he refers to him as a visitor, which tells us that the twin frequently appears in Suttree’s dreams since the latter is unable to overcome that incident. Second, the “mauve halfmoon”³²³ of the stillborn twin and Suttree’s birthmark is what binds them together. In other words, Suttree is bound to death for eternity, and

³²¹ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 11.

³²² McCarthy, *Suttree*, 16-17- 34.

³²³ McCarthy, *Suttree*, 17.

he is literally a “mirror image”³²⁴ of his dead brother. Therefore, “that experience had “undermined” him. A more exact word cannot be imagined. Beginning to think is beginning to be undermined.”³²⁵ Moreover, this obsession with death not only provokes suicidal thoughts but also leads him to be under the spell of hallucination. The second quote stated above is a hallucination of Suttree when he awakens from another nightmarish dream to declare that he belongs to the other world. The term “hand” alludes to his desire for suicide. To put it another way, the hand of his brother is spread to take him to the space where he needs to be. The twin’s hand is an outlet; a way to liberate his shuttered self. Moreover, the “mirror image” is once again restated as “Suttree and Antisuttree”.³²⁶ Hence, McCarthy’s reliance on such a technique is a way to disclose “Suttree’s character since little is revealed through the dialogue or through the overt narrative statement,”³²⁷ as suggested by Spencer. Thus, the desire for death is revealed through the different dreams Suttree has, which get him closer to the other world. In other words, dreams and hallucinations reveal “the subtle step when the mind opted for death”³²⁸ and then discovers the essence of life. In a similar vein, Marie-Agnès Gay suggests that Suttree reaches a certain level of “prescience that the essence of life is a state in-between life and death”³²⁹. In this regard, McCarthy puts “emphasis on liminality”³³⁰ when exposing Suttree’s existential awareness of the presence of death in life which he perceives as “what the living carry with them. A state of dread, like some uncanny foretaste of bitter memory. But the dead do not remember and nothingness is

³²⁴ McCarthy, *Suttree*, 16.

³²⁵ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 5.

³²⁶ McCarthy, *Suttree*, 16-34

³²⁷ William Christopher Spencer, “The Extremities of Cormac McCarthy: The Major Character Types,” (PhD diss., The University of Tennessee, 1993), 154.

³²⁸ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 5.

³²⁹ Marie-Agnès Gay, “Cormac McCarthy’s Aesthetics of the “Canal-Rhizome” in *Suttree*,” *European Journal of American Studies* 12, no. 3 (2017): 10, doi: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejas.12252>

³³⁰ Gay, “Cormac McCarthy’s Aesthetics of the “Canal-Rhizome,” 10.

not a curse. Far from it.”³³¹ So, McCarthy creates one of the most complex characters in his fiction who is afflicted by an ambivalent self that first longs for death but, eventually, transcends its submission to be overwhelmed with the need for change; the necessity of revolt. To put it another way, the writer starts an experiment in order to uncover “the relationship between the absurd and suicide, the exact degree to which suicide is a solution to the absurd,”³³² and how this awareness of the absurdity of life may alter one’s consciousness from submission to rebellion against his reality. Simply, McCarthy exposes his vision of the absurd through Suttree’s absurd reasoning. While *The Road* demonstrates a different exposition of the concept.

2. The Suicide of the Mother: A Nihilist View of Life

Since McCarthy’s personas are represented as strangers to themselves and to the world they dwell in, their response to the absurdity that characterizes their lives reveals the invisible side of the self. Suicide, or what is referred to as “voluntary death,” is one of the ways that man undertakes in an attempt to end the absurd. However, suicide, in fact, divulges the birth of the submissive self and the victory of the absurd. This perception is compatible with the McCarthian vision of the absurd as an unavoidable reality that leads either to the death of the self or to the rebirth of the rebel.

From the theoretical perspective, Albert Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus* attempts to offer his vision of the absurd by answering a fundamental question of whether life has a meaning to be lived or not. For him, it will be better lived only if it has no meaning, and then he goes further, assuming that no one enjoys his life knowing that it is absurd, only if one chooses to rebel against

³³¹ McCarthy, *Suttree*, 189.

³³² Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 6.

that absurdity which is being brought to the surface by the conscious³³³. In other words, the absurd at his sight “dies only when we turn away from it”³³⁴. Interestingly, he endeavors to clarify the relationship between the absurd experience and suicide, declaring that the latter is never considered as the outcome of the absurd.³³⁵ However, it is a complete acceptance of the absurd because the individual is aware of the absurdity of his life and even aware of his future.³³⁶ To put it another way, if one decides to remain alive, this absurd cannot be settled, but it has to be transcended i.e., suicide can be escaped by rejecting death since “that revolt gives life its value.”³³⁷ To sum up, committing suicide is not the way to face the absurd or rebel against it as it might be perceived, but it is a form of submission and acceptance of the absurd. On the other hand, suicide for Jean-Paul Sartre is perceived as a matter of choice “This choice is absurd, [...] It is absurd in this sense, that the choice is that by which all foundations and all reasons come into being, that by which the very notion of the absurd receives a meaning. It is absurd as being beyond all reason.”³³⁸ So, Sartre confesses the absurdity of human reality and declares that man’s choice to draw an end to his life is irrational, as it announces the victory of the absurd over us. Moreover, he agrees with Camus in rejecting man’s resort to suicide since for Sartre, “Suicide is an absurdity which causes my life to be submerged in the absurd.”³³⁹ Lastly, both scholars consider voluntary death as one of the reactions that man can escape to when he does not consider any other possibilities in life. This nihilistic perception of human existence is personified in *The Road* by the character named “the mother”.

³³³ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 18.

³³⁴ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 18.

³³⁵ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 19.

³³⁶ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 19.

³³⁷ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 19.

³³⁸ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 479.

³³⁹ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 540.

The mother is a character whom we meet only through the father's flashbacks in the first half of the novel. She is the soul that haunts the mind and the life of the father and the little boy. Though we do not encounter the female character in the different stages of the work, her presence, in the narrative, is crucial since she helps us to see the juxtaposition that McCarthy implicitly establishes between submission and rebellion. In other words, her submission to the absurd leads to the rebirth of other rebellious selves in the novel.

The critical reading of *The Road* necessitates the examination of the traces of death in the life of the McCarthian protagonists. As we have already seen in the previous chapter, the characters are aware of the absurdity of their life which has eventually estranged them from themselves and pushed them to seek solutions or a better way to escape the futility of their existence. Hence, McCarthy highlights the impacts of the absurd on the self through his exploration of the concept of suicide. The latter divulges the birth of the submissive self and its surrender to the absurd.

The suicide scene of the mother includes hints about the couple's conversations during the early years of the apocalypse about death and suicide. In this regard, the father used to teach his wife the diverse methods that might be used to end their life when the circumstances call for that. The mother blames her husband, saying that they "used to talk about death, she said. We dont any more. Why is that? I dont know. It's because it's here. There's nothing left to talk about."³⁴⁰ The dreadful reality of the post-apocalypse grants the idea of death the largest space in the thinking of the mother more than the father. It is, therefore, perceived as inexorable since life becomes meaningless for her and suffering is futile in her sight. In other words, the declaration of the absence of death from their daily discussions is due to its dominance over their lives, so "There's

³⁴⁰Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 48.

nothing left to talk about”³⁴¹. This view strengthens our argument about the inevitability of death for the mother and the pessimism she has about the future. Moreover, this pessimism dominates her thinking after the delivery of her boy as is alluded to in the following lines “Because I am done with my own whorish heart and I have been for a long time [...] My heart was ripped out of me the night he was born so dont ask for sorrow now. There is none.”³⁴² In other words, the birth of the child symbolizes the death of the mother’s self because the post-apocalyptic despair and the suffering that she needs to endure will be doubled with the presence of a new person to care for. These feelings are written and transmitted in a minimal style, not only in the above quote, but in the whole episode. Hence, we suggest that the author purposefully relies on short sentences that carry more of the meaning of pain than when the speech is wordy. Minimalism here proves the assumption that language may sometimes escape our thinking and sentiments. Hence, McCarthy relies on short sentences to put more emphasis on the emotions being expressed as well as to transmit the silence that interrupts her speech. Besides, minimalism is also a technique used to allude to the cold relationship between the members of the family. In this regard, the diction used by the mother better supports this perception. Words like “whorish heart”, “ripped out”, and “sorrow” reveal the impacts that the apocalypse leaves on her self.

The new reality becomes unbearable for the mother, and suicide appears to be the way leading to unconditional relief. McCarthy shows that self-distraction is the only option his female character has to face the absurd, decaying world. The suicide episode demonstrates her regret for the delay of suicide that she “should have done it a long time ago. When there were three bullets in the gun instead of two. I was stupid. We’ve been over all of this. I didnt bring myself to this. I was brought. And now I’m done. I thought about not even telling you. That would probably have

³⁴¹ McCarthy, *The Road*, 48.

³⁴² McCarthy, *The Road*, 48-49.

been best.”³⁴³ The wife believes in the inescapability of death, so delaying suicide is a stupid act. She is simply the type of character who has “recognized, even instinctively, the ridiculous character of that habit, the absence of any profound reason for living, the insane character of that daily agitation, and the uselessness of suffering.”³⁴⁴ Hence, these attitudes reveal that fighting for a meaningless life is the most ridiculous act that man can do. In this regard, the absurd seems inescapable and imposes on her the annihilation of the self to put an end to her life’s suffering. Therefore, the female character leaves no chance for her husband to discuss her decision since he is the reason for her previous delay and present suffering. Moreover, she confesses that the world is getting worse and survival is the biggest illusion. Subsequently, the avowal that they are “the walking dead in a horror film”³⁴⁵ alludes to a gloomy reality where the presence of death threatens the existence of the self.

The mother’s suicide has been interpreted differently by critics. Willard P. Greenwood suggests that it is a sacrifice from the mother who dares to put an end to her life in order to improve the situation of her husband and son, so her “decision to kill herself was one made in the name of love, not cowardice”³⁴⁶. For him, this sacrifice is due to the fact that there remain two bullets in their pistol which will be the solution for her husband and son to avoid falling into the cannibals’ hands. However, Erik Wielenberg stands in opposition to Greenwood’s view. He believes that McCarthy’s female character shows no sign of interest in the situation of her husband and even her son³⁴⁷. If we consider Wielenberg’s interpretation, we find that it is more

³⁴³ McCarthy, *The Road*, 47.

³⁴⁴ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 6.

³⁴⁵ McCarthy, *The Road*, 47.

³⁴⁶ Willard P. Greenwood, *Reading Cormac McCarthy* (Santa Barbara, California: The Pop Lit Book Club, 2009), 78.

³⁴⁷ Allan Chavkin and Nancy Feyl Chavkin, “The Question of Suicide in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* and the “Mother” Episode of *The Grail Draft*,” *ANQ: A Quarterly Journal of Short Articles, Notes and Reviews* (October 2018): 11, doi: 10.1080/0895769X.2018.1535310

compatible with the mother's behavior that precedes her suicide. In a conversation between her and her husband, she says

"I'm begging you."

"I dont care. I dont care if you cry. It doesnt mean anything to me."

"Please. Stop it. I am begging you. I'll do anything[...] Will you tell him goodbye?"

"No. I will not."

"Just wait till morning. Please. I have to go. She had already stood up."

"For the love of God, woman. What am I to tell him?"

"I cant help you."

"Where are you going to go? You cant even see."

"I dont have to."³⁴⁸

These words reveal her coldness and carelessness, which refute Greenwood's interpretation. In a similar vein, what needs to be highlighted here is the careless nature of the woman, which is the outcome of her submission to the absurd; a point that Wielenberg neglects in his analysis of the suicide scene. Thus, the uselessness of suffering, the meaninglessness of life, and the inescapability of death constitute the mother's nihilist vision of the world and then erase any other possibility of a purpose in life in her sight. She says, "It's the right thing to do. You're talking crazy. No, I'm speaking the truth. Sooner or later, they will catch us, and they will kill us. They will rape me. They'll rape him. They are going to rape us and kill us and eat us and you wont face it. You'd rather wait for it to happen. But I cant. I cant."³⁴⁹ So, suicide is perceived as the solution to end her suffering since life has no meaning to be lived. Her final words summarize her nihilism and divulge the supremacy of the submissive self, which gives no space for revolt

³⁴⁸ McCarthy, *The Road*, 49.

³⁴⁹ McCarthy, *The Road*, 48.

against the absurd existence. For her, the “only hope is for eternal nothingness, and I hope it with all my heart.”³⁵⁰ Accordingly, death, or what she refers to as nothingness, stands for her present desire and the denial of any purpose in her life, which may “restore its majesty to that life,”³⁵¹ to use Camus’ expression. Interestingly, death becomes her new lover who comforts her in the most desirable way as she confesses to her man, saying “I don’t care. It’s meaningless. You can think of me as a faithless slut if you like. I’ve taken a new lover. He can give me what you cannot. Death is not a lover. Oh yes, he is.”³⁵² In other words, death grants her the inner peace that life cannot afford, so she walks to nothingness with no hesitation, and “She would do it with a flake of obsidian. He’d taught her himself. Sharper than steel.”³⁵³

To sum up, Cormac McCarthy constructs an absurd setting where his characters are thrown to face their fate. The female character, named the mother, is used to explore his opposition to the nihilist perception of human existence. The character is represented in a negative tone to demonstrate his rejection of suicide as a way to end the absurd, since the latter never ends with death, but death declares us as losers. Moreover, this character is not given even a chance to exist and occupy a space in his fictional world, but is created as a spirit that appears only in the memory of others. On the other hand, McCarthy provides us with the antithesis of the nihilist mother: the father and his son. The male characters stand for the notion of revolt, which is the concern of the second part of the chapter.

To conclude, the concept of suicide seems to occupy a large space in the four novels as it appears under the guise of either physical suicide, like in *The Road*, the desire to commit suicide, which we have seen in *Suttree*, philosophical suicide, as with the Wrightian female characters in

³⁵⁰ McCarthy, *The Road*, 48

³⁵¹ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 36.

³⁵² McCarthy, *The Road*, 48.

³⁵³ McCarthy, *The Road*, 49.

Native Son and *The Outsider* or the slow death of Damon. Thus, the differences in the exposition of man's response to the absurd never deny the existence of several affinities in the conceptualization of the issue. Therefore, the analysis provided leads us to suggest that Cormac McCarthy and Richard Wright show that when man first becomes conscious of the absurd, escapism is his first response. In other words, man tries to find an outlet in order to escape the burden his self is condemned to carry. Hence, both writers elucidate the two forms of suicide through the inner examination of the characters' minds. Both Wright and McCarthy show that the absurd does not dictate suicide, but it is the individual's religious convictions, cowardice, inherited ethics, or an old moral shock that interfere with the taking of such a decision. In other words, the four novels reveal the writers' opposition to these forms of sacrificing the self and the mind in order to create inner peace or fall into the arms of nothingness just to end the suffering in life. Lastly, this opposition leads them to suggest an alternative reaction by creating absurd heroes who dare to rebel against the whole universe by asserting their freedom and imposing their own laws on an unfair world. This is, in fact, the concern of the following part that further discusses this point.

II. Challenging the Absurd in Cormac McCarthy's and Richard Wright's Works

This part of the chapter aims to bring together the Camusian concept of revolt developed in *The Myth of Sisyphus* and the Sartrean notion of the freedom of choice as exposed in *Being and Nothingness* in the selected corpus as reactions that are suggested by the two southern writers to face the meaninglessness of life.

Albert Camus proposes revolt as the only possible way to overcome the absurd. This form of challenge to the absurdity of life is a mere quest for order and purpose. In other words, it is

that strength empowered by an inner desire to heartlessly defeat fate.³⁵⁴ Moreover, Ben Stoltzfus in *Camus and the Meaning of Revolt* interprets it as an indication of the existence of something within man that deserves his revolt.³⁵⁵ He, therefore, finds it as “an affirmation of man’s self against”³⁵⁶ his life and the world as a whole. On the other hand, Jean Elizabeth Kennard perceives the concept as a call for a positive stance against the irrationality of life.³⁵⁷ This suggests that the act of revolting against the absurd exposes the practice of freedom attributed to man. However, Camus believes that this freedom is limited by common rules which make of absolute freedom a mere illusion. He also confesses that the absurd restores the freedom of action which is expressed in the act of revolt.³⁵⁸ While Camus confesses the freedom of his absurd hero who chooses revolt, yet this freedom is also limited by death, which may come at any time to put an end to all that he has achieved. Since death is a fact, this absurd man needs to overcome his fear of death in order to continue his life, which he categorizes as absurd. All these views describe the conception of revolt exposed in *The Myth of Sisyphus* before it reappears almost a decade later in his discussion of the notion of rebellion or revolution in modern societies with the publication of *The Rebel*: a period known for Camus’ keen interest in issues of colonialism, revolutionary violence, history, and politics. Patrick Hayden suggests that the concept of revolution that Camus reflects upon in the last essay is entirely based on his interpretation of the perception of history that Hegel and Marx proposed earlier.³⁵⁹ Hence, the later publication may seem to have widened his conceptualization to add historical and political dimensions to the early

³⁵⁴ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 36.

³⁵⁵ Ben Stoltzfus, “Camus and the Meaning of Revolt,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 10, no. 3 Albert Camus: special number (1964): 293.

³⁵⁶ Stoltzfus, “Camus and the Meaning of Revolt,” 293.

³⁵⁷ Jean Elizabeth Kennard, “Towards a Novel of the Absurd: A Study of the Relationship between the Concept of the Absurd as Defined in the Works Sartre and Camus and Ideas and Form in the Fiction of John Barth, Samuel Beckett, Nigel Dennis, Joseph Heller, and James Purdy,” (PhD diss., University of Microfilms, 1969), 17.

³⁵⁸ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 38.

³⁵⁹ Patrick Hayden, “Albert Camus on Revolt and Revolution,” in *Brill’s Companion to Camus: Camus among the Philosophers*, ed. Matthew Sharpe, Maciej Kaluza and Peter Francev (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2020), 376.

philosophical elucidation of the concept. Since the present study is concerned with the analysis of the reactions of the self when confronting the meaninglessness of life, the philosophical insight of revolt initiated in *The Myth of Sisyphus* best serves its aim because its primary concern is far from being twinned with historical and political spheres. In addition to the fact that it is in the first essay where Camus has philosophically discussed the reactions of the self to the absurd which we find pertinent to the current research.

On the other hand, Sartre calls for what is described as “absolute freedom,”³⁶⁰ a concept that has led to a split in the Sartrean scholarship between those who clarify what Sartre has meant by ‘absolute freedom’ and those who argue for the inconsistency of his thought. In this regard, in *Being and Nothingness*, Jean-Paul Sartre introduced his revolutionary conception of freedom, which he aims to distinguish from the common perception of the concept known as “freedom to obtain”³⁶¹ to suggest what is termed “freedom to choose.”³⁶² Accordingly, Detmer David relies on the terminology “practical freedom” and “ontological freedom”³⁶³ to better describe and explain the two types Sartre aims to draw a distinction between in his work. Therefore, the first type is the most popular, which, basically, refers to what an individual has wished to obtain or, in Sartre’s words, is “the ability to obtain the ends chosen.”³⁶⁴ To this definition, Landau states that this type of freedom is best interpreted as the ability of man to act in “certain ways in the practical world.”³⁶⁵ Whereas, the second type is a philosophical perception of the concept which

³⁶⁰ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay in Phenomenological Ontology*, Trans. Hazel Barnes (New York, New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), 371.

³⁶¹ Iddo Landau, “Sartre’s Absolute Freedom in *Being and Nothingness*: The Problems Persist,” *Philosophy Today* (2012): 463.

³⁶² Landau, “Sartre’s Absolute Freedom in *Being and Nothingness*,” 463.

³⁶³ David Detmer, *Freedom as a Value* (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1988), 60.

³⁶⁴ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 483.

³⁶⁵ Landau, “Sartre’s Absolute Freedom in *Being and Nothingness*,” 463.

solely argues for “the autonomy of choice.”³⁶⁶ This distinction between the senses of freedom, suggests Detmer, is merely an attempt to “acquitting himself [Sartre] of charges of inconsistency.”³⁶⁷ In *Freedom as Value*, Detmer clarifies what lies behind Sartre’s “absolute freedom” in an endeavor to elaborate on the Sartrean philosophical perception of freedom, which he terms, as stated above, “ontological freedom”. To this end, he claims that man is absolutely free due to the impossibility of being determined by any situation that would impose how to interpret it or what project to undertake as well as the way to act in order to fulfill that specific project.³⁶⁸ In other words, he confesses the existence of different “external forces”³⁶⁹ that intervene in directing man to a given situation, yet they can in no way determine his actions.³⁷⁰ To further explain this insight, Detmer restates the example of the unemployed worker who is absolutely free to choose whether to accept his situation or rebel against it, but still, he is unable to become rich promptly, while his failure or success in realizing it is insignificant.³⁷¹ The latter, in fact, is the essence of what he terms “practical freedom”³⁷² and what is known in Sartre’s work as ‘the freedom to obtain’ to which he claims that “success is not important.”³⁷³ Hence, this suggests that the second type of freedom is not absolute, but it is limited. Therefore, we come to conclude that regardless of the ambiguity that Sartre’s conceptualization of freedom may enfold as claimed by some critics, he attempts to escape inconsistency by revealing “that our freedom is both unlimited and limited, claims that we are both absolutely free and yet impotent.”³⁷⁴ This distinction helps to clarify that ‘freedom of choice’ is what his *Being and Nothingness* advocates. Santoni,

³⁶⁶ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 483.

³⁶⁷ Detmer, *Freedom as a Value*, 58.

³⁶⁸ Detmer, *Freedom as a Value*, 64.

³⁶⁹ Detmer, *Freedom as a Value*, 64.

³⁷⁰ Detmer, *Freedom as a Value*, 64.

³⁷¹ Detmer, *Freedom as a Value*, 64.

³⁷² Detmer, *Freedom as a Value*, 60.

³⁷³ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 483

³⁷⁴ Detmer, *Freedom as a Value*, 66.

one of the famous late critics of the Sartrean scholarship, also promotes this interpretation of Sartre's conception of freedom. In a number of works, he argues for the misunderstanding of many great figures from the perspective that Sartre has suggested, such as Camus, Merleau-Ponty, and Marcel.³⁷⁵ This misinterpretation is merely due to their failure to identify the distinction between "the *ontological* from the *practical* (or *existential*)"³⁷⁶ freedom [emphasis original]. This has led Santoni to consider Sartre's declaration that "there is freedom only in a situation, and there is a situation only through freedom,"³⁷⁷ the essence of his conceptualization of freedom. Therefore, the recognition of these two senses defies the possibility of contradiction in the perspective that Sartre suggests. In this regard, Wilkerson's view falls within this stream of thought since he considers the distinction between the ontological and the practical freedom essential to grasp the conception suggested by Sartre.³⁷⁸

However, Landau stands in opposition to the above views, claiming that even what Sartre terms 'ontological freedom' is paradoxical since there exists "considerable empirical evidence"³⁷⁹ that refutes its absolutism. To put it another way, he claims that man is unable to attribute meaning to the situation in which he finds himself, which demonstrates his inability to choose on his project.³⁸⁰ This stance is built on arguing against the examples Sartre provides to elucidate his perception of the concept of freedom, such as the slave and the torturer.³⁸¹ So, Landau believes

³⁷⁵ Ronald E. Santoni, "Camus on Sartre's 'Freedom': Another 'Misunderstanding,'" *The Review of Metaphysics* 61, no. 4 (2008): 785.

³⁷⁶ Santoni, "Camus on Sartre's 'Freedom,'" 787.

³⁷⁷ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, quoted in Ronald E. Santoni, "Camus on Sartre's 'Freedom': Another 'Misunderstanding,'" *The Review of Metaphysics* 61, no. 4 (2008): 788.

³⁷⁸ William Wilkerson, "Time and Ambiguity: Reassessing Merleau-Ponty on Sartrean Freedom," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 48 (April 2010): 209.

³⁷⁹ Landau, Sartre's Absolute Freedom in *Being and Nothingness*, 466.

³⁸⁰ Landau, Sartre's Absolute Freedom in *Being and Nothingness*, 466.

³⁸¹ Landau, Sartre's Absolute Freedom in *Being and Nothingness*, 467.

that even what is known as ontological freedom “clash[es] with reality”³⁸² which bounces the scale of the inconsistency of the philosophical perspective suggested by the French existentialist scholar at his sight. He, therefore, proclaims that such an inconsistency is also traced in Sartre’s contradicting views, where he sometimes reveals ontological freedom as limited, while his initial claims render it absolute.³⁸³

In the Sartrean discourse, the concept of freedom necessitates the individual’s choice to be something, which is in return an affirmation of the value of his choice, and is the best choice for all men since nothing can be considered as good for man if it is not the same for all men. This leads us to the fact that freedom is an individual act in accordance with one’s own desires, convictions, and values, as it is the way to transcend one’s facticity and challenge the meaninglessness of his existence. In other words, the practice of freedom is an act of creation as it is a challenge to the absurdity of human existence.

Hence, we come to conclude that Sartre’s freedom of choice and Camus’ revolt are the only possible ways to face the meaninglessness of life and end the absurd that characterizes it. In other words, both scholars call for confronting the meaningless existence rather than committing suicide. Therefore, the choice to live is a battle against a senseless world. Regardless of the differences in the perspective that each scholar suggests and the perception of human existence, both place man in a strong position where he needs to seek meaning and impose his logic on the world. Hence, it is on this common ground that we build our analysis of the novels of Wright and McCarthy in order to demonstrate the rebirth of the self that chooses to challenge the absurdity of the world it is thrown into.

³⁸² Landau, Sartre’s Absolute Freedom in *Being and Nothingness*,” 468.

³⁸³ Landau, Sartre’s Absolute Freedom in *Being and Nothingness*,” 468.

1. The Restoration of the Black's Freedom of Choice and the Birth of the Rebellious Self in *Native Son*

Though many critics limit the discussion of Wright's texts to racism, Existentialism is a dominant philosophy that gives this issue another dimension. As the Southern writer exposes his people's submission to the absurd through philosophical suicide that announces the death of the mind and the burial of the free rebellious self, he forges a new type of character who dares to challenge not only the established norms, but even the whole world to feel his existence and restore his sense of self. This juxtaposition between submission, freedom of choice, and revolt makes the novel canonical. Thomas Bigger, who is born and raised in a one-room apartment and who has the burden of a black boy, goes through different stages of revolt and exposes that he is free to choose and seek an authentic existence.

The first stage in Bigger's revolt is to overcome his fear of death so that he can start a new adventure. In this regard, Wright entitled the first part of the novel *Fear* to demonstrate that the biggest obstacle in his character's journey is within himself. To put it another way, the protagonist needs to find a way to control the amount of the feelings of fear he has and to change the ordinary vision he has about his self since "fear and hate and guilt are the keynotes"³⁸⁴ that determine his attitudes toward the other. The characterization of Bigger brings to mind every single black man who is condemned to be a slave to his fear of the Whites because they hold his fate in their hands. Even Wright was a captive for such feelings, as is evident in his confession "As I contemplated Bigger and what he meant, I said to myself: I must write this novel, not only

³⁸⁴ Wright, *Native Son*, 300.

for others to read but to free myself of this sense of shame and fear.”³⁸⁵ Hence, the protagonist Thomas Bigger is the embodiment and the voice of all other Biggers whom Wright has encountered in his life, even himself.

Though the novel is stylistically characterized by the dominance of the third-person narration, the inner fear that controls Bigger is most often expressed in the first-person point of view. In other words, Wright chooses to give the character the chance to externalize what is deeply buried in his consciousness on his own behalf without the intermediacy of the narrator. In a discussion with his friend Gus, Bigger asks

“Where the white folks live?”

[...] Bigger doubled his fist and stuck his solar plexus. “Right down here in my stomach,” he said. [...] “Every time I think of ‘em, I feel ‘em,” Bigger said.

“Yeah; and in your chest and throat, too,” Gus said. “It’s like fire.” “And sometimes you can’t hardly breathe....”

[...] “That’s when I feel like something awful’s going to happen to me....” Bigger paused, narrowed his eyes. “Naw; it ain’t like something is going to happen to me. It’s ... it’s like I was going to do something I can’t help it.”³⁸⁶

Bigger's declaration that the whites reside in his stomach and he can feel them alludes to his fear of them. These feelings are similar to a “fire” that burns him from the inside and makes him unable to “breathe”. Moreover, the last sentence of the quote divulges a key detail that explains all that comes later in the narrative. The sentence ‘It’s ...it’s like I was going to do something I can’t help it’ Tells us that the behaviors of Bigger are simply a logical response out of his own

³⁸⁵Richard Wright, *Native Son*(New York, New York: Harper Collins e-books, 2009)quoted in C.Ramya, “Richard Wright’s Picture of Fear and Hatred in His Fiction with Special Reference to *A Native Son*: A Brief Analysis,” *International Journal of Research and Analytical Reviews* 2, no. 3 (July – Sep. 2015): 73.

³⁸⁶ Wright, *Native Son*, 30.

fear. In other words, fear is what determines the nature of his reactions, while the mind seems resigned to the impulse. The scene that best illustrates this view is Mary's death. As a matter of fact, Wright prepares the reader for the shocking behaviors of his protagonist as a consequence of his dread of the other. Though Mary Dalton is seen by Bigger as a threat to his sense of self since she reminds him of his subordination and blackness, killing her was never his intent. His fear of being caught in a white girl's bedroom late at night is a serious threat to his own life, as we can see in the following excerpts

Bigger held his breath. Mary mumbled again; he bent over her, his fists clenched in fear. [...] Mrs. Dalton could not see him; but he knew that if Mary spoke she would come to the side of the bed and discover him, touch him. He waited tensely, afraid to move [...] Frenzy dominated him.

Gradually, the intensity of his sensations subsided [...] He felt that he had been in the grip of a weird spell and was now free.³⁸⁷

The narrator describes the sheer terror that strikes Bigger with the appearance of Mrs. Dalton at the bedroom door. Expressions and phrases like "held his breath", "his fists clenched in fear", "afraid to move", "frenzy", and "weird spell"³⁸⁸ reveal the intensity of fear that makes him lose control over his behaviors. It, therefore, compels him to fall under the spell of "hysteria,"; unconscious of his actions and guided by the human instinct of survival. At this moment, Wright declares the rebirth of the young, rebellious black boy who behaves for the first time as a free human being. So, in order to understand and explain Bigger's act of murder, reference to the notion of freedom highlighted by Camus and Sartre is crucially important.

The French scholars agree on one main point which is the absence of God or the Master in life which grants man the freedom of action. For Camus, it is the absurd that "restores and

³⁸⁷ Wright, *Native Son*, 80-81.

³⁸⁸ Wright, *Native Son*, 80-81.

magnifies, on the other hand, my freedom of actions.”³⁸⁹ So, he suggests that man’s awareness “of one’s life, one’s revolt, one’s freedom, and to the maximum, is living, and to the maximum.”³⁹⁰ On the other hand, this freedom is restricted by the presence of the other, who is also a free being, for Sartre. This has led the French existentialist to suggest the equation “freedom limits freedom”³⁹¹. Moreover, this freedom is manifested in “making one choice instead of another, we give meaning and value to the choice we make.”³⁹²

If we try to analyze Bigger’s act of murder, taking into consideration these ideas, we would first say that the incident is a chance to make a decisive decision about his existence. This means that the character has a few seconds to make a choice and decide who would survive: he or the white girl. Thus, Bigger acts like a free man, not like a cowardly black man. Accordingly, he chooses to breathe; to continue to exist no matter what. Therefore, the choice to restore his freedom of action by choosing to live at the expense of the death of Mary is a sign of the transcendence of his old dread of death and the fear of the “white blur”³⁹³, as he describes the opposite race. Hence, the death of the white girl announces the rebirth of a rebellious Bigger with a liberated self that dares to challenge the world. This new Bigger declares that he never feels “alive in this world until I felt things hard enough to kill for them”³⁹⁴. So, the act “of murder is an act of creation,”³⁹⁵ as Edward Margolies presupposes.

³⁸⁹ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 38.

³⁹⁰ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 38.

³⁹¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay in Phenomenological Ontology*, Trans. by Hazel Barnes (New York, New York: Philosophical Library, 1956) quoted in Jorge G. Arocha, “On Freedom and Death in Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness*,” *Contemporary Philosophy* (2018): 17.

³⁹² Brian Lightbody, “Death and Liberation: A Critical Investigation of Death in Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness*,” *Minerva - An Internet Journal of Philosophy* 13 (2009): 88.

³⁹³ Wright, *Native Son*, 323.

³⁹⁴ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 38.

³⁹⁵ Edward Margolies, *The Art of Richard Wright* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969), 120.

Before moving to another stage in Bigger's revolt, we need to consider a key detail that appears in the early scenes of the narrative which is ignored by critics who have analyzed the novel before. It is the seeds of a rebellious self generated by the awareness of the senselessness of life. While discussing with his friend Gus, Bigger declares

"Every time I get to thinking about me being black and they being white, me being here and they being there, I feel like something awful's going to happen to me..."

"There ain't nothing you can do about it. [...] You black and they make the laws..."

"Why they make us live in one corner of the city? Why don't they let us fly planes and run ships"

"Aw, nigger quit thinking about it. You will go nuts." [...] "Don't think about it," Gus said [...] "You think too much."

"What in hell can a man do?" Bigger asked, turning to Gus.

"Get drunk and sleep it off."

"I can't."³⁹⁶

Moving carefully through these words enlightens us about a significant idea buried between the lines. The discussion suggests that Wright attempts to make his reader compare the attitudes of each character, Bigger and Gus, and the way they perceive life. So, when Bigger shows his rejection of the marginalized status enforced on them by the dominant white race, Gus' s answers divulge his submissiveness which he tries to implement in Bigger when he tells him that "You think too much." "What in hell can a man do?" [...] "Get drunk and sleep it off."³⁹⁷ Therefore, Gus is calling for the suicide of the mind through drinking alcohol and taking this mind to an eternal sleep, just like Bigger's mother, Mrs. Thomas, and Bessie, whom we have previously analyzed. In other words, Gus is suggesting to escape from their reality since they are

³⁹⁶ Wright, *Native Son*, 28-29.

³⁹⁷ Wright, *Native Son*, 28-29.

powerless and to put aside the idea of revolt. In this regard, philosophical suicide is once again referred to in this scene to emphasize the juxtaposition between Submission, revolt, and the quest for freedom. Moreover, the response of Bigger to Gus's suggestion reveals the Wrightian rejection of all the other forms of escaping the absurd and denying the existence of the self, which is his intent behind the insertion of such a scene. In other words, he is inviting the reader to consider such a conflict. Hence, Wright aims to show that his protagonist is born to be free; to be rebellious, though, in his early years, he could not figure out a way to restore his freedom of action until his murder of the Daltons' daughter, the spirit of revolt was already there.

Since the act of murder announces the rebirth of a new Bigger who chooses to be and then shapes that existence by taking a new path that fits with the newly attained vision of life. This leads us to refer to the new value system adopted by the free black boy. The latter ignores all the established laws in an attempt to have "a flag and a country of"³⁹⁸ his own as suggested by Wright in *How "Bigger" Was Born*. Moreover, the sense of power that he gains equips him with the strength to play the role of the manipulator in Dalton's house. With the death of Mary, Richard Wright emphasizes the heroism of his character, who holds his future in his hands. This emphasis is evident in the freedom of choice Wright attributes to the protagonist who repudiates the possibility of escaping from his employer's house and chooses to remain closer to his enemy in order to be "the subversive strategist"³⁹⁹ who controls the process of events. To illustrate, the following quotes demonstrate Bigger's assessment of the possibilities he has at hand

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.

³⁹⁸Richard Wright, "How "Bigger" Was Born," in *Native Son* (New York, New York: Harper Collins e-books, 2009), 334.

³⁹⁹Joyce Ann Joyce, *Richard Wright's Art of Tragedy?* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1986), 59.

He could run away; he could remain; he could even go down and confess what he had done. The mere thought that these avenues of action were open to him made him feel free, that his life was his, that he held his future in his hands.⁴⁰⁰

So, the existence of such possibilities liberates him from the old ties since he is aware that he can change the direction of his life the moment he wants. That is why he tries to remind himself of this fact each time, because being able to choose means having power, and this is the case in the second quote when he equates the options he has with power. It is this sense of power that makes him a free human being and a true fighter. This sense of freedom crowns him a master of his existence and the creator of his path in life since “he held his future in his hands.”⁴⁰¹ He, eventually, succeeds “through his own efforts, though his eventual ability to find freedom from the constraints of the past.”⁴⁰² Accordingly, Wright attempts to test the survival of the new rebellious self of his character amid the chaos. In other words, it is mainly a way to divulge that the absurd never leads to submission, but it gives birth to a new sense of self. Therefore, Bigger, as a free absurd hero, chooses to fight and to push “to the surface his hidden potential to pursue life to its fullest, to push himself in order to discover his greatest possibilities.”⁴⁰³ As Joyce suggests in *Richard Wright's Art of Tragedy*.

Since Bigger accepts his absurd existence and chooses revolt in a quest for a meaningful life, suffering is, therefore, inescapable in such a journey because it is just one face of this absurd. Moreover, the character starts his struggle for survival when the truth of his crimes is revealed. The last part of the novel –*Book Three: Flight*– exposes a bitter war between our absurd hero and the Whites, where he fights with a sisyphusian spirit the whole system and rises to be stronger

⁴⁰⁰ Wright, *Native Son*, 141-160.

⁴⁰¹ Wright, *Native Son*, 141-160.

⁴⁰² Alessandro Portelli, “Everybody's Healing Novel: “Native Son” And Its Contemporary Critical Context,” *The Mississippi Quarterly* 50, no. 2 (Spring 1997): 256, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26476275>

⁴⁰³ Joyce, *Richard Wright's Art of Tragedy?*, 60.

than his fate. Though Bigger is aware of being weaker than the Whites, he never surrenders and chooses to keep on fighting to death

He reached the top of the tank [...] He lay flat, on his stomach, in snow. [...] He had a wide view. [...] he raised the gun, leveled it, aimed, and shot; [...] no one fell. [...] He shot again. No one fell.

Then the water hit him ...it was like the blow of a pile driver. His breath left and he felt a dull pain in his side that spread [...] he felt cold, freezing; his blood turned to ice. [...] He was not afraid anymore.⁴⁰⁴

The detailed description of the attempt to incarcerate Bigger makes the reader live the experience with the character. Thus, the suffering from cold and hunger never refrains Wright's black hero from raising the gun and "attacking viciously anybody who threatens him"⁴⁰⁵. Similarly, the last sentence in the quote, "he was not afraid anymore," reinforces the character's transcendence of the old fear of death in the presence of the Whites. When such sensations evaporate, he becomes able to properly feel and interpret the other's emotions and attitudes toward him. In other words, the inner peace he gains makes him able to sense that the Whites have "gone beyond hate [...]" 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 mere punishment. They were going to make his death as bloody symbol of fear to wave before the eyes of that black world. Rebellion rose in him.⁴⁰⁶ The passage includes hints about a significant point that needs to be highlighted. Wright intends to show that the new rebellious self that Bigger gains refuses its association, in any sort, with submission. That is why, when he thinks that his death may "mean more than a mere punishment,"⁴⁰⁷ anger stimulates him to fight such a perception and never give the whites the chance to enslave him again, even in the moment of death. In other words, he was free to choose to revolt and decide his path. Eventually,

⁴⁰⁴ Wright, *Native Son*, 213- 214.

⁴⁰⁵ Laurel J. Gardner, "The Progression of Meaning: In the Images of Violence in Richard Wright's "Uncle Tom's Children" and "Native Son," *CLA: College Language Association Journal* 38, no. 4 (June 1995): 433.

⁴⁰⁶ Wright, *Native Son*, 219.

⁴⁰⁷ Wright, *Native Son*, 219.

Richard Wright creates “for us a symbol”⁴⁰⁸: a free, absurd hero who challenges the law system, social conventions, and stereotypical images that constitute his meaningless life. Besides, Wright’s protagonist is a literary elucidation of Sartre’s perception of the freedom to choose the direction that one desires for life and create meaning to his existence. He is also the epitome of Camus’ Sisyphus in the way he endures the unfair trial, and the pain of being imprisoned to make a victory from his suffering. The Wrightian Sisyphus succeeds in mocking the ridiculous black submissiveness and the white dominant culture by manipulating them and making them fear his presence. It, eventually, creates a sense of satisfaction and relief that makes him accept his fate. Though the protagonist is sentenced to death, this death never means the end; it is his victory since Bigger is born to be a hero and dies like a hero because he dies free. So, one must imagine *Bigger happy*. This philosophical perspective is also identified in *The Outsider*, as confirmed in the following section.

2. Cross Damon: A Rebellious Black Hero Who Is Condemned to Be Free

People who do not suffer can never grow up, can never discover who they are. [But] that man who is forced each day to snatch his manhood, his identity, out of the fire of human cruelty that rages to destroy it knows, if he survives his effort, and even if he does not survive it, something about himself and human life that no school on earth [...] can teach. He achieves his own authority and that is unshakable.⁴⁰⁹

-James Baldwin.

Richard Wright aims to fictionalize philosophy in an artistic work that encompasses the major concepts that express his life perception. With such a purpose in mind, the notions of revolt and freedom of choice are, therefore, discussed distinctively from the vision offered in *Native Son*. Hence, the transition from submission to action is highlighted through a shift in the life of

⁴⁰⁸Wright, *Native Son*, 298.

⁴⁰⁹James Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name* (New York: Dial Press, 1961) quoted in Anne O. Cauley, “A Definition of Freedom in the Fiction of Richard Wright,” *CLA: College Language Association Journal* 19, no. 3 (1976): 328, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44321617>

one main character- Cross Damon. A process that is similar to the one that will be traced later with McCarthy's Sutter. So, Wright demonstrates that suicide, with its two forms, is rooted in the black culture and is not dictated by the absurd since escapism can never end it, but rebelling against it and creating a purpose for one's existence is what defeats it. It is the way Wright, however, responds to those "who attempted to teach him that rebellion against that environment could bring only defeat, Wright chose the loneliness and the heroism."⁴¹⁰ As claimed by Anne O. Cauley

The incident that alters the narrative line is the subway accident, which announces the death of old Cross Damon while granting the chance to a new Damon to come into existence. Richard Wright changes the process of events through the accident in order to suggest an alternative reaction to the senselessness of existence: the freedom of choice and revolt. This leads us to suggest that it is this event that allows the character to detach himself from the old ties that constrained his freedom of action and annihilated his self. Hence, this notion is the essence of the whole concept of the absurd, since the practice of freedom is what leads to revolt which gives life its own value. In this regard, Wright declares, "That man, for good or ill, is his own ruler, his own sovereign, his own keeper. I hold human freedom as a supreme right and good for all men, my conception of freedom being the right of all men to exercise their natural and acquired powers as long as the exercise of those powers does not hinder others from doing the same"⁴¹¹. To put it another way, this conceptualization gives men the right to make themselves or create their own world, however, they need to be able to "confront the irrational forces in themselves and their worlds, forces which lie below the surface of law and social conventions as they exist in

⁴¹⁰ Anne O. Cauley, "A Definition of Freedom in the Fiction of Richard Wright," *CLA: College Language Association Journal* 19, no. 3 (1976): 331, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44321617>

⁴¹¹ Richard Wright, "Tradition and Industrialization," *White Man, Listen!* (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, 1964), 50-51.

America, and master themselves towards a creation of being, a creation of personal values which transcends these forces.”⁴¹² This comment of Anne O. Cauley on Wright’s vision of freedom makes the parallel between the Wrightian perception of freedom of action and the conceptualization suggested by Camus and Sartre evident.

Since human life, for Sartre, has no meaning beyond that which man creates for it, he finds us condemned to be free to create ourselves in addition to the meaning and the values of our life. He suggests that “Man [...] Not that he is simply what he conceives himself to be, but he is what he wills, and as he conceives himself after already existing, as he wills to be after that leap towards existence. Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself.”⁴¹³ But we are responsible for the choices we make since “our responsibility is thus much greater than we had supposed, for it concerns mankind as a whole. [...] And my action is, in consequence, a commitment on behalf of all mankind.”⁴¹⁴ So, the individual choices and the actions man makes shape the world where he exists. In other words, such a responsibility is inescapable if we aim to create a better future for us and the whole of humankind. This “commitment” divulges the practice of freedom and the creation of an alternative world. On the other hand, as stated in the opening of the current section, Albert Camus, in his discussion of the absurd, proposes revolt against reality and established values or norms as the only way to restore the majesty of life and give it its value. The latter is achieved through the freedom to reorganize the world in accordance with the individual’s own value system.⁴¹⁵

Reading Wright’s novel with these philosophical ideas in mind helps us to dissect the complexity of the main character. Therefore, the chance that he takes advantage of to create

⁴¹²Cauley, “A Definition Of Freedom In The Fiction Of Richard Wright,” 339.

⁴¹³Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, edit. By John Kulka, trans. By Carol Macomber (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 27-28.

⁴¹⁴Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, 29.

⁴¹⁵Steven J. Rubin, “Richard Wright and Albert Camus: The Literature of Revolt,” *The International Fiction Review* 8, no. 1 (1981): 12, <https://journals.lib.unb.ca/index.php/IFR/article/view/13478>

himself and the life he desires is the practice of freedom that expresses his dissatisfaction with the old life he had. Hence, the feelings of dread that he witnesses in the first part of the narrative and then after his decision to pretend death and even the killing of his friend Joe in the hotel, represent the limits of his freedom, which Tommie Shelby highlights when he says that

We should note the conception of freedom Cross operates with: to do whatever one likes without being encumbered by one's past or commitments. We should also note the limits of what this freedom can deliver. While Cross is "free," this freedom does not erase his dread: "He was *empty, face to face* with a sense of *dread* more *intense* than anything he had ever felt before."⁴¹⁶ [Emphasis added]

So, dread is the source of actions, and it can never be separated from the freedom to act. "He was empty" since he evacuates his self from the traces of his past feelings and then chooses a new path where he befriends his newly acquired sense of self. Wright attempts to reveal the way man makes himself through the process of Damon's journey, who is dead for his people but reincarnated in the name of Leonard Lane. Thus, the first move he takes is to drop the old self with all its wounds and choose a new one that is able to shape his attitude toward the world and the Others. This free self grants him the ultimate freedom to impose his own values on the whole world. Richard Wright, thus, clearly demonstrates the shift from "nothingness" to "essence" through the practice of freedom

Because to begin with he is *nothing*. He will not be anything until *later*, and then he will be what he *makes* of himself. Man simply is. Not that he is simply what he conceives himself to be, but he is what he wills, and as he conceives himself after already existing — as he wills to be after that leap towards existence. Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself.⁴¹⁷ [Emphasis added]

⁴¹⁶Tommie Shelby, "Freedom in A Godless and Unhappy World: Wright as Outsider," in *The Cambridge Companion to Richard Wright*, edited by Glenda R. Carpio (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 129-130, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108567510.009>

⁴¹⁷Sartre, *Existentialism is Humanism*, 3.

The Sartrean conception is fictionalized in Damon's actions. For Wright, the reincarnation of the character is "a supreme challenge that went straight to the very heart of life. What was he to do with himself? For years, he had been longing for his own way to live and act, and now that it was almost his."⁴¹⁸ In other words, Wright shows that man's longing for freedom is a rebellion against his conditions because he is moved by the desire to be what he wants. This parallel in the perception of the concept is reinforced when we examine the following quotes

There is no determinism — man is free, man is freedom [...] And I had but one reply to make. You are free, therefore choose that is to say, invent. No rule of general morality can show you what you ought to do: no signs are vouchsafed in this world.⁴¹⁹

That all men were free was the fondest and deepest conviction of his life. And his acting upon this wild plan would be but an expression of his perfect freedom. He would do with himself what he would, what he liked.⁴²⁰

In the first quote, Sartre equates man to freedom to show that we are born to be free creatures who have the burden to make ourselves in the image we choose. Such a perspective echoes what Wright says in the first sentence of the second quote. Hence, this freedom of action attributed to the new Damon creates a rebel: a prototype in American fiction.⁴²¹

The rebellious self reincarnated in Leonal Lane- the new Damon- seeks dominance and power. Accordingly, Damon is urged by the desire to "govern his life according to some conscious aim [...] Cross who must now map out his life according to his own values,"⁴²² inaugurates himself as a little God who decides who are the guilty criminals and the way to punish them. In this regard, Camus has once claimed that "If man wants to become God, he

⁴¹⁸ Wright, *The Outsider*, 91.

⁴¹⁹ Sartre, *Existentialism Is Humanism*, 5- 7.

⁴²⁰ Wright, *The Outsider*, 91.

⁴²¹ Rubin, "Richard Wright and Albert Camus: The Literature of Revolt," 12.

⁴²² Charles I. Glicksberg, "Existentialism in "The Outsider," *Four Quarters: January* VII, no. 2 (1958): 20.

arrogates to himself the power of life or death over others.”⁴²³ Therefore, the four victims whom Damon decides to sentence to death in accordance with his own laws externalize his eagerness for power. In other words, Wright elucidates the extent to which the ultimate freedom, which is wrongly perceived, may lead man to “dedicate himself to the worship of power”.⁴²⁴ In fact, he chooses to explore and criticize it through the confession that comes at the end of the character’s journey. Hence, the liberated Damon, after going through that whole process, becomes able to suggest the right way to revolt against his reality: that type of revolt which allows men to initiate reformation to the old values and their world as a whole. He sums up his experience as follows

“I wanted to be *free*...To feel what I was *worth*...What living meant to me...I loved life too...much...”

“And what did you find?”

[...] “The search can’t be done alone,” [...] “Never alone...Alone a man is *nothing*...”

[...] “Is there anything, Damon, you want me to tell anybody?”

[...] “I wish I had some way to give the *meaning* of my life to *others*...*To make a bridge from man to man*...[...] Tell them not to come down this road...”⁴²⁵ [Emphasis added]

Wright suggests that the man who is reborn to recreate his self and the world, eventually, realizes that he went through the wrong way because he wants to know “what living meant to”⁴²⁶ him. Therefore, we suggest that the Sartrean freedom of choice and the Camusian form of revolt are more appropriate to the twentieth-century man. Accordingly, the meaning of life is the message Damon wants to transmit to the blind shades who are still roaming the “world eaten by the cancer of meaninglessness,”⁴²⁷ to borrow Glicksberg’s words. In contrast, Wright never shows his

⁴²³ Camus, *The Rebel*, 122.

⁴²⁴ Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt*, trans. By Anthony Bower (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1956), quoted in Masud, Mitsuko, “Richard Wright’s *The Outsider* and Albert Camus’s *L’Étranger*,” *Studies in English and American Literature*, no. 46 (March 2011): 46.

⁴²⁵ Wright, *The Outsider*, 397.

⁴²⁶ Wright, *The Outsider*, 397.

⁴²⁷ Glicksberg, “Existentialism in “The Outsider,” 25.

protagonist as depressed or as having come to nothing. But he is represented as exceptional, a hero who remains strong to fight to the end. Damon declares with a challenging tone

Don't think I'm so odd and strange...I'm not...I'm legion...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 dreams 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...⁴²⁸

Damon after declaring that “alone a man is nothing”, comes to drive our attention to the fact that he is not like any man, but a ‘legion’ who is awakening after a long sleep in order to defeat the old laws and reinforce the rebirth of “the real men”⁴²⁹ to take over as leaders of the new world. And when he says that “somebody must prepare the way for them,” he refers to the oath of a rebellious man he takes seeking the lost meaning of life; a tough journey that empowers him and creates the “legion” he is. Damon is a legendary absurd hero who has the courage to challenge the world, assert his freedom, and prove his mental and physical power. Thus, this leads us to suggest that Wright shows, on the one hand, that the character succeeds in his revolt when he generates a new sense of self and finds a purpose in life because of his unusual intelligence, on the other hand, highlights that it is not the right choice for the ordinary man because of its horror. This is the perception that no study in the field has offered. On the other hand, McCarthy’s perspective does not deviate a lot from this stream of thought.

3. *Suttree*: A Transition from Nihilism to the Freedom of Action

⁴²⁸ Wright, *The Outsider*, 398.

⁴²⁹ Wright, *The Outsider*, 398.

The novel divulges McCarthy's distinctive logic in disclosing his appropriation of the Sartrean-Camusian discourse. He, firstly, creates a character who is obsessed with suicidal thoughts as a result of the absurdity of his existence, then demonstrates the way these inner feelings, eventually, lead him to an existential epiphany. Hence, this incident changes his life direction as he moves into action by asserting his freedom of choice that forges the rise of a rebellious self from the old, submissive, shattered one. Moreover, the reincarnation of Suttree's self within the absurd is what creates from the work a masterpiece.

Cormac McCarthy structures his text in a way that we rarely encounter in the literature of his time. On the one hand, he shows his protagonist as a character who is bound to death in order to unveil the facticity of death in life. On the other hand, he aims to disclose that the experience leads his character to start a new chapter in his wretched existence: choosing his destiny by asserting his freedom of action and revolt against the forces that drive him to the threshold of nothingness. However, this way of exposing literary personas is adopted to demonstrate that suicide or the intent to commit suicide is, in fact, man's first choice in a world where chaos defines his reality. Yet, this might be the beginning of a new adventure. This is to say that McCarthy paves the way for a change or prepares his reader for the new direction that the narrative will take by making his protagonist experience death, which has been frightening him for years.

These death experiences are exposed on three different occasions throughout the narrative. Firstly, the part in which McCarthy decides to isolate his protagonist from the world to take him to the wilderness deserves to be granted a space in the ongoing analysis. So, this

character, whose world is “unshaped by the constructions of a mind obsessed with form,”⁴³⁰ attempts to discover what value his life might have when being at the threshold of death. In other words, he is moved by the “desire for unity, this longing to solve, this need for clarity and cohesion”⁴³¹. This quest takes him to the Appalachians to quench his thirst for a precise answer to the bothersome question. Moreover, in this episode, McCarthy reveals the fine line between life and death. Hence, being in the wilderness where the human senses are released blurs the borders of the “waking and dreaming states”⁴³² of Suttree, who, eventually, can see the bare facts of human existence. To put it another way, the harshness of the winter season, hunger, and the silence of the world make him confront his end. Simply, the journey to the mountains makes him see “with a madman’s clarity the perishability of his flesh”⁴³³. Death approaches Suttree as his body shrinks; it is the moment when the mind confronts its old desires. He feels that “Everything had fallen from him. The scarce could tell where his being ended or the world began, nor did he care.”⁴³⁴ It is the moment of truth when he realizes a slow death advancing to contain his shattered self and end its senseless suffering. To end this experience, McCarthy confirms Camus’s view that “The body’s judgment is as good as the mind’s and the body shrinks from annihilation.”⁴³⁵ This epiphany shakes his consciousness and opens his eyes to the inescapability of death and the reality that man is unable to choose his existence, but he can only bring meaning to it. This vision is consistent with Suttree’s confession to the hunter whom he met in a forest near the mountain, saying that he is “not a figment”⁴³⁶ and “At least I exist”⁴³⁷. Such a confession

⁴³⁰McCarthy, *Suttree*, 531.

⁴³¹Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 34.

⁴³²Spencer, “The Extremities of Cormac McCarthy,” 162.

⁴³³McCarthy, *Suttree*, 159.

⁴³⁴McCarthy, *Suttree*, 158.

⁴³⁵Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 7.

⁴³⁶McCarthy, *Suttree*, 361.

⁴³⁷McCarthy, *Suttree*, 361.

reveals Suttree's considerations of the existence of other possibilities to face the absurdity of his life rather than suicide. It, however, declares the reincarnation of the self that was buried among the dead for a long.

The second existential epiphany Suttree witnesses is when he falls at the mercy of the spells of Mother She. The scene, once again, is included to make Suttree realize that the absurd can never be fought by death since it only affirms it, but rebelling against it by embracing life and giving it the desired meaning is what weakens the absurd. McCarthy's characterization of the witch equates it to death: a ghost among the living as revealed in the following quote

He passed her in the street one evening toward the summer's end [...] and he could smell her on the night wind, lank harridan, a stale musty odor, dust dry. [...] Suttree shunned those adder's eyes in which the sun lay split[...] An odor of violated graves. Her small shadow fell against him like a bird and she passed on. [...] He run among the crowds dodging and veering.⁴³⁸

The word choice used to picture the physical description of the witch divulges the peculiarity of the person. Equally, expressions like "a stale musty odor", "adder's eyes", and "an odor of violated graves"⁴³⁹ personify a monstrous creature who awakens the fear of death in Suttree. Yet, it should be noted that the above passage chronologically appears in the novel before Suttree's journey in the Appalachians. So, this leads us to suggest that the appearance of Mother She in his life is the last straw that pushed him to action; whether to surrender to death and commit suicide or revolt against it by asserting his freedom of action. Accordingly, when Suttree returns from the mountain, he decides to confront the witch again, seeking confirmation of the new vision gained from the last trip.

⁴³⁸ McCarthy, *Suttree*, 153.

⁴³⁹ McCarthy, *Suttree*, 153.

The presence of Suttree in the house of “the agent of death,”⁴⁴⁰ as Bell Vereen calls her, symbolizes a visit to the other world. A step further to overcome the old buried fears and acquire a new sense of self. In this regard, we notice that the protagonist undergoes a near-death experience through hallucination. The latter is the outcome of the potion prepared for Suttree by the witch, which makes him lose the sense of life to live in dreams and nightmares. However, this weird experience ends with relief which once again comes to declare the death of old Suttree and the rebirth of a new self. McCarthy alludes to the character’s epiphany through the narrator’s description of the first scene in the houseboat, after the meeting with the witch, where Suttree “lay with his feet together and his arms at his sides like a dead king on an altar. He rocked in the swells, floating like the first germ of life adrift on the earth’s cooling seas, formless macule of plasm trapped in a vapor drop and all creation yet to come”⁴⁴¹. Through this metaphorical representation of the character, McCarthy first establishes juxtaposition between the old submissive self of Suttree and the new “creation yet to come”⁴⁴² alluding to the birth of the new free self who is ready to challenge the whole world. Second, since the passage comes after the hallucination that makes him taste death, McCarthy changes the tone when externalizing the emotions of Suttree. In other words, in the passage previously stated about the characterization of the witch, Suttree is overwhelmed by the feeling of dread that led him to ‘run among the crowds,’⁴⁴³ however, the above quote ends with relief which may be considered as a sign of rebirth. Arguably, Bell Vereen, in the most influential study done in the field, declares that it is due to the potion of Mother She Suttree’s “body has been taken and rearranged [...] *this ritual*

⁴⁴⁰Bell M. Vereen, “Death and Affirmation: *Suttree*,” in *Achievements of Cormac McCarthy*(Baton Rouge: LSUP: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), 97.

⁴⁴¹ McCarthy, *Suttree*, 534.

⁴⁴² McCarthy, *Suttree*, 534.

⁴⁴³ McCarthy, *Suttree*, 153.

encounter and *others like it* harden him bit by bit against fear”⁴⁴⁴ [emphasis added]. To put it another way, through these experiences, McCarthy is building a transition in the attitudes of his character: from a keen desire to commit suicide to embracing life, or from submission to freedom of action and revolt.

The third and last of these experiences is when the protagonist witnesses typhoid fever which comes to confirm the epiphany of the two previous experiences. In fact, typhoid fever clarifies his blurred vision of human existence and introduces him to a new phase in life. The gift of McCarthy genuinely appears in narration; the way he travels with his character and readers to a parallel world in order to expose to us and to Suttree the essence of existence and introduce the latter to his true self. It is the trip from which a new self is rejuvenated and is ready to face the world. It merely makes him discover that “there is one Suttree and one Suttree only”⁴⁴⁵ who deserves to exist. While still in the hospital, Suttree “no longer cared that he was dying. He was being voided by an enormous liver-colored cunt with prehensile lips that pumped softly like some levantine bivalve. Into a cold dimension without time, without space and where all was motion.”⁴⁴⁶ He, eventually, transcends the old obsessions that have blurred his life perception, or to restate the narrator’s comment that Cornelius Suttree “is being voided”⁴⁴⁷ and is ready to start over. The experience unifies the body with a new self that perceives the previous pains as a part of the battle for survival in an absurd world. Arguably, William Spencer suggests that “Suttree also seems to conclude that death is the ultimate mystical experience, the necessary step in

⁴⁴⁴Vereen, “Death and Affirmation: *Suttree*,” 96.

⁴⁴⁵ McCarthy, *Suttree*, 575.

⁴⁴⁶ McCarthy, *Suttree*, 564.

⁴⁴⁷ McCarthy, *Suttree*, 575.

overcoming the impediments to true perception occasioned by reason, self, and life”⁴⁴⁸. So, Suttree emerges from death to embrace life and accept the chaos that constitutes it.

On the other hand, we ought to refer to Suttree’s ambivalence, which we have highlighted in the first part of the chapter, that is mainly due to the fear of annihilating the self. To put it another way, though the protagonist once believed that his life was senseless and needed a quick end, he wants confirmation that it is the right choice. Hence, the quest for an answer is what leads him to the mountains and then takes him to confront the witch, but typhoid fever comes, at last, to enlighten him that the absurd can never be escaped through death since it is just another way to affirm it. Whereas the absurd requires heroes to defeat it. Thus, Suttree’s awareness of the value of life necessitates fighting with a Sisyphean heart to defeat his fate. In this regard, we come to suggest McCarthy advocates the view which goes that the absurd never dictates the annihilation of the self, but it encourages the reincarnation of a rebellious self that is ready to fight to be happy. Hence, we notice the shared affinities between the McCarthian perception of the concept and the vision Camus elucidates in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, who says

It [revolt] is a constant confrontation between man and his own obscurity. [...] It challenges the world anew every second. Just as danger provided man the unique opportunity of seizing awareness, so metaphysical revolt extends awareness to the whole of experience. It is that constant presence of man in his own eyes. It is not aspiration, for it is devoid of hope. That revolt is certainly of a crushing fate, without the resignation that ought to accompany it.⁴⁴⁹

So, man confronts his meaningless life when he decides to exist and crushes the nihilistic dread by accepting the chaos that defines his universe to move beyond it. This vision is what McCarthy promotes when he reveals the change in the attitudes of his character toward life. In a similar

⁴⁴⁸ Spencer, “The Extremities of Cormac McCarthy,” 168.

⁴⁴⁹ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 37.

vein, one of the most important scenes that illustrates this perception is when Suttree visits an old man in the neighborhood named the ragpicker

He stood at the foot of the ragpicker's mattress and looked down at him. The old man lay with his eyes shut and his mouth set and his hands lay clenched at either side. He looked as if he had *forced himself to death*.

You have no right to represent people this way, he said. A man is all men. *You have no right to your wretchedness*⁴⁵⁰. [Emphasis added]

The Ragpicker's death is perceived by Suttree as a suicidal act. Hence, to demonstrate the change in the attitudes of the character, it is more pertinent to compare his reaction in the opening scene of the narrative when he watches the retrieval of a suicidal body from the river with the above words. As we have argued in the first part of the chapter, when we analyzed the opening scene, the dead man's flesh evokes feelings of dread and anxiety in Suttree since it reminds him of the absurdity of life and emphasizes the mortality of humans. In contrast, fear and dread seem to find their way to Suttree's heart when watching the ragpicker's body in the above passage. In other words, he rejects the solution of suicide as an escape from the absurd since it is an act of cowardice. He, however, seems to blame the man for such a death when he says he does not have the right to represent all people that way. This suggests that a man's choice represents all other men since nothing is good for a man if it is not good for all other men, as Sartre claims, so the ragpicker does not have the right to represent other men as cowardly and submissive like him. Thus, Suttree believes himself to be different from the dead man and rejects being represented by him. This leads us to suggest that he considers himself a fighter or a free man who is able to transcend the facticity of his existence and chase meaning and order in life, not a nihilist. While the last sentence, where he talks of the wretchedness, alludes to the fact that though man is free to

⁴⁵⁰ McCarthy, *Suttree*, 524-525.

choose the direction of his life, suffering is not only a choice but is a part of the game of existence, and man has to struggle for survival. Thus, this change in the perception of life divulges the reincarnation of a free rebellious self that transcends the old pain when considering them as a part of a fate that needs to be crushed. It is a rebirth of a self that masters the dynamics of the absurd, but chooses to continue to exist, to fight since the self is created in freedom. Accordingly, he comes back to life with a new self that aims to divest itself

Of the little cloaked godlet and his other amulets in a place where they would not be found in his lifetime and he'd taken for talisman the simple human heart within him. Walking down the little street *for the last time* he felt everything fall away from him. Until there was *nothing left* of him *to shed*. It was all gone.⁴⁵¹ [Emphasis added]

This new free self revolts not only against the external reality by leaving Knoxville to start a new adventure elsewhere, but even against the old feelings and desires that were driving it to its finitude. Thus, McCarthy's metaphorical representation of the character, in the last sentence of the above quote, alludes to the burial of all previous thoughts and emotions in Knoxville, and he is, eventually, reborn with a new sense of self. Hence, the essence of his revolt lies in his departure from the "terrestrial hell,"⁴⁵² which unveils the courage of the absurd hero who learns the best way to defeat his fate and pursue the freedom to live an authentic life. Suttree is, however, McCarthy's Sisyphus who attempts "to write a manual of happiness"⁴⁵³ when he makes from the pain and suffering his greatest victory. Moreover, the character's life takes a different direction with his departure from McAnally Flats: an end that obliges us to draw an analogy between Suttree and the boy from *The Road*. Therefore, both Suttree and the boy acquire a new sense of self after overcoming their old pains and suffering. In other words, the absurd reality

⁴⁵¹ McCarthy, *Suttree*, 584.

⁴⁵² McCarthy, *Suttree*, 17.

⁴⁵³ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 77.

leads to the rebirth of new rebellious selves that challenge their fate and succeed in creating themselves. The essence of this challenge is revealed in the new adventure that McCarthy's characters start, as disclosed in the epilogue of both texts. The next section confirms such a perspective through a textual analysis of *The Road*.

4. The Reincarnation of the Free Absurd Hero in McCarthy's *The Road*

A. Sisyphusian Revolt of the Father and the Son

Sisyphus, proletarian of the gods, powerless and rebellious, knows the whole extent of his wretched condition [...] The lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory.⁴⁵⁴

-Albert Camus.

Cormac McCarthy suggests the opposing vision to submission which is predominantly centered on challenging the absurdity of life. Accordingly, it therefore offers juxtaposition between the two main concepts: Suicide, revolt and the choice to practice one's freedom. In this regard, the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel is a fictionalization of these philosophical notions. As the mother stands for the nihilistic perception of the world, the father, with his twelve-year-old boy symbolize the essence of the doctrine of the two French scholars.

The Myth of Sisyphus is a call for rejecting nihilism as an inescapable reality of modern life. It, however, advocates revolt against meaninglessness at the expense of suicide and philosophical suicide as the form to transcend or escape the absurd, either through death or by attributing meaning to a senseless world through religious beliefs. In this regard, Camus believes that "all of them [meaning the other existential scholars] without exception suggest escape. Through an odd reasoning, starting out from the absurd over the ruins of reason, in a closed

⁴⁵⁴ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 77.

universe limited to the human, they deify what crushes them and find reason to hope in what impoverishes them. That forced hope is religious in all of them”⁴⁵⁵. Hence, John Foley interprets Camus’ critique of the escapist solutions to the absurd through religion as a vision “which expressed the individual’s nothingness without God”⁴⁵⁶ and a confession of the freedom attributed to man. Moreover, the Camusian discourse is an invitation to revolt against the “illusory religious, political and ideological doctrines”⁴⁵⁷ as Michael Keren declares in his reading of Camus’s notion of revolt.

In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus suggests the notion of the “absurd man”⁴⁵⁸ or “the absurd hero”⁴⁵⁹ who dares to challenge the futility of his existence and manifest his freedom just to keep on living. Camus defines the absurd man as follows

What, in fact, is the absurd man? [...] he prefers his courage and his reasoning. The first teaches him to live *without appeal* and to get along with what he has; the second informs him of his limits. Assured of his temporally limited freedom, of his revolt devoid of future, and of his mortal consciousness, he lives out his adventure within the span of his lifetime. That is his field, that is his action, which he shields from any judgment but his own.⁴⁶⁰

This hero, whom Camus describes, is conscious of the absurd which he decides to face and fight instead of surrender. Camus believes that revolting against the absurd does not necessitate the presence of hope for a better future since life is an adventure that has to be first accepted the way it is and then enjoyed living it. Camus’s absurd man is the master of his life and actions, which determine the course of his life, because he is aware of his destiny, which he embraces and

⁴⁵⁵ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 43.

⁴⁵⁶ John Foley, *Albert Camus from The Absurd to Revolt* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 8.

⁴⁵⁷ Michael Keren, “Absurdity and Revolt in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*,” *Phaen Ex* 7, no. 1 (spring/summer 2012): 222, doi:10.22329/p.v7i1.3339

⁴⁵⁸ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 78.

⁴⁵⁹ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 76.

⁴⁶⁰ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 43.

accepts as a part of who he is. This perception of the absurd hero is illustrated by the ancient myth of Sisyphus, the Greek hero who challenges the gods' punishment to make of it his victory.

Sisyphus, who was punished by the gods to roll a rock to the top of the mountain, which falls back because of its weight, is sentenced to the absurd for eternity. He is the tragic hero who accepts his destiny to discover happiness within the absurd since "happiness and the absurd are two sons of the same earth"⁴⁶¹. Sisyphus is a hero because "he is superior to his fate. He is stronger than his rock"⁴⁶². He realizes that suffering is a part of human existence and the source of the lost meaning of the senseless universe we inhabit. Sisyphus succeeds in transforming that godless, silent world into the arena of his greatest victory. This mythical character epitomizes the essence of the concept of revolt in Camus's sight, as is revealed at the end of the essay, where he states that

Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He too concludes that all is well. This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. [...] The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.⁴⁶³

The legacy of Sisyphus negates the presence of gods and promotes revolt as the only means to crown him the master of his days. Hence, suffering, futility, and commitment to the rock, which are meant to constitute his torture have, eventually, become the source of happiness that Camus predicts at last when he declares Sisyphus happy.

The philosophical ideas that are discussed by Camus are fictionalized by Cormac McCarthy. Moreover, the juxtaposition between revolt and submission, as responses to the

⁴⁶¹ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 77.

⁴⁶² Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 77.

⁴⁶³ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 78.

meaninglessness of life and a way to reincarnate a rebellious self, unveils the influence of McCarthy by the Camusian discourse. Accordingly, suffering, as a part of the game of survival in a post-apocalyptic setting, constitutes the very essence of the characters' reality since it stands for the fact of their existence. In other words, suffering is inseparable from human existence or fate since it shapes and determines the course of our lives, according to Camus. In this regard, the uselessness of suffering undoubtedly leads to nihilism that divulges the dominance of the submissive self, as we have seen with McCarthy's female character, the mother, whereas the acceptance of suffering as a part of our fate leads to revolt. Hence, the dystopian post-apocalyptic environment of the novel at hand reveals the prolonged suffering of the survivors. The father and his son realize the futility of their existence as well as they attempt to create meaning to their suffering in life by first rebelling against death. Furthermore, the father, during his journey southward, endeavors to implement the idea of the struggle against all the outer forces into the child's mind while instilling in him the way to survive in a decaying world in order to fight the infiltration of the possibility of death to his thinking as one way to escape suffering. The following discussion better illustrates this perception

"He'd put a handful of dried raisins in a cloth in his pocket [...] That's all there is, isn't it?" he –the boy- said.

"Yes."

"Are we going to die now?"

"No."

"What are we going to do?"

"We're going to drink some water. Then we're going to keep going down the road."⁴⁶⁴

⁴⁶⁴ McCarthy, *The Road*, 74.

The father refuses to surrender to the ramifications of the post-apocalypse. Likewise, he perceives suffering as the manifestation of his existence and death as a sign of defeat. This is what makes him oppose his son's suggestion of being closer to death than to life when he says that they would drink water and continue their trip. The man's words reveal his rebellious nature and desire to reshape, or more appropriately, to create a rebellious self from the little boy. Hence, this passion for life is the first reason that makes him abandon the idea of killing his son as a way to prevent him from future suffering and to send him "into the darkness alone." [...] "I cant. I cant hold my son dead in my arms. I thought I could but I cant"⁴⁶⁵. Though the man's health deteriorates and he feels death approaching, the life or the survival of his boy stands for the life objective he himself fails to achieve. Therefore, the father's primary goal is to make the boy believe that their existence in a post-apocalyptic environment is a facticity, as death is, while their journey southward is the project they started together, and it has to be carried out by the young boy. He manages to transmit these convictions to his child as we can see in the following conversation "I wish I was with my mom. He didnt answer.[...] After a while he said: You mean you wish that you were dead. Yes. You musnt say that. But I do. Dont say it. It's a bad thing to say."⁴⁶⁶ So, the father insists upon the fact that a death wish is not tolerated. Hence, he aims to eliminate such a possibility from the boy's mind and teaches him how to fight to the last moment.

It is worth mentioning the theme of hunger in relation to the characters' rejection of death. The novel includes many instances where characters struggle in order to satisfy their biological needs, just to escape dying from starvation, as is demonstrated in the following quote

"You think we're going to die, dont you?"

[...] "We're not going to die." [...] "Why do you think we're going to die?"

⁴⁶⁵ McCarthy, *The Road*, 209- 235.

⁴⁶⁶ McCarthy, *The Road*, 47.

[...] “We don’t have anything to eat.”

“We’ll find something.”

“Okay. How long do you think people can go without food?”

[...] “Maybe a few days.”

“And then what? You fall over dead?”

“Yes. Well, you dont. It takes a long time. We have water. That’s the most important thing. You dont last very long without water.”⁴⁶⁷

Though they are starving to death, the father refuses to surrender as long as he is still on foot. So, when we read sentences like “It takes a long time. We have water. That’s the most important thing. You dont last very long without water”⁴⁶⁸, we feel his resistance to death and passion for life. For him, death is a fact, but it never denies them the right to fight until the last moment, since this suffering is what gives life its meaning. In other words, he “imagined a purpose to his life, he adapted himself to the demands of a purpose to be achieved and became the slave of his liberty.”⁴⁶⁹ This declaration from Camus’s part echoes the reaction proposed by Sartre to face the senselessness of human existence. Simultaneously, McCarthy’s character is the personification of the Sartrean doctrine that promotes the idea that the self comes into existence through the practice of the freedom of choice, and once it chooses to go beyond its facticity through devotion to the created project, it externalizes the inner feelings of dissatisfaction. The latter are the same feelings that Camus associates with the genesis of revolt. In other words, what Sartre perceives as the making of the essence after the realization of the facticity of human existence and the freedom of choosing a purpose in life that he attributes to man as a reaction to the nihilist vision of life go hand in hand with what Camus considers as a revolt against the absurd. Therefore, McCarthy, through his characters, reveals the bitter struggle for survival in a post-apocalyptic

⁴⁶⁷ McCarthy, *The Road*, 85-86.

⁴⁶⁸ McCarthy, *The Road*, 86.

⁴⁶⁹ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 38.

land that requires true fighters who never give up on their objective in life, just like the man and his boy. Correspondingly, McCarthy's personas resemble the figure of Sisyphus, who embraces his suffering and the punishment of the Gods to, eventually, be a hero. In this regard, the revolt of the father and his son is a response from their "consciousness" to the "absurd human condition"⁴⁷⁰. It is, therefore, a declaration of the reincarnation of a new self that overcomes the pain of loss- the loss of the wife or the mother, hunger, and loneliness in a world that offers no sign of hope. Their struggle reaches its apogee when they challenge nature, as illustrated in the following excerpt

The falling snow curtained them about. There was no way to see anything at either side of the road. He was coughing again and the boy was shivering, [...] Finally he stopped. The boy was shaking uncontrollably.

[...] "If we were going to die would you tell me?"

"We're not going to die."⁴⁷¹

McCarthy's characters pursue the possibilities of their existence even if it leads them to stand against the harshness of nature. Even in the most difficult situations they go through, doubt is never given a chance to sneak into the father's thinking, who simultaneously fights its presence in the boy's mind, saying that death is still far and they can never surrender, even if they are freezing. Moreover, the assertive tone of the man is always comforting to his son since it teaches him to be stronger than their fate. This scene described by Cormac McCarthy echoes Camus's interpretation of Sisyphus's rebellion in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, who says that "At each of those moments when he –Sisyphus- leaves the heights and gradually sinks toward the lairs of the gods,

⁴⁷⁰ Keren, "Absurdity and Revolt," 223.

⁴⁷¹ McCarthy, *The Road*, 79-80.

he is superior to his fate. He is stronger than his rock.⁴⁷² Sisyphus, who challenges the power of the Gods and accepts the absurdity as well as the suffering of his life, becomes a true hero. Accordingly, the characters of McCarthy resemble Camus's Sisyphus in their rebellion against their fate. The suffering makes them heroes who dare to go forward no matter what. McCarthy's Sisyphusian figures accept their absurd destiny while creating their own 'project' in life, to borrow Sartre's terminology. Therefore, he declares the rebirth of rebellious selves in a jungle where survival is for the fittest. On the other hand, myth creation is also another form of resistance explored by McCarthy. So, it is the concern of the following section to unveil the way McCarthy adapted the myth of Prometheus to challenge the absurdity of human existence.

B. Myth Appropriation and the Quest for Project in Life

The fire that recurrently appears in the dialogues of the father with his son alludes to the ancient myth of the Titan Prometheus. Daniel Luttrull highlights the continuity between *No Country for Old Man* and *The Road* in the symbolism of the fire carriers, which he links to its archetypal origin: Prometheus.⁴⁷³ Moreover, Luttrull suggests that the fire in the last scene of *No Country for Old Man*, where the father of Sheriff Bell appears "carrying fire in a horn",⁴⁷⁴ continues its infiltration to the novel published a year later: *The Road*. Hence, the myth of Prometheus is adapted by McCarthy to divulge his rejection of the nihilist perception of life.

Heziod's *Works and Days* and *Thoeogony*, in addition to Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound*, tell the myth of a Titan hero who cheats on Zeus in the sacrificial offerings to the Olympian

⁴⁷² Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 76-77.

⁴⁷³ Daniel Luttrull, "Prometheus Hits *The Road*: Revising the Myth," *Cormac McCarthy Journal* (2010): 17, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42909408>

⁴⁷⁴ Luttrull, "Prometheus Hits," 17.

Gods, then steals a flame from the God of fire to be granted to humans⁴⁷⁵. Consequently, Prometheus was punished by Zeus not only for his betrayal, but also as a way to end the threatening outgrowth success of the human race created and admired by Prometheus. The punishment of the Titan hero, “by enchainment with an eagle devouring his liver,”⁴⁷⁶ is an endeavor to break the spirit of rebellion against the Gods. On the other hand, Raymond Trousson’s study, on the changes in the perception of the Prometheus theme from the Roman literature to the romantic period, reveals “In detail how a new glorification of the revolt motif in the late eighteenth century resurrected Prometheus as an ideal hero, and how the interpretations of *the following romantic period* have dominated the literary history of Prometheus to the present”⁴⁷⁷. Hence, the myth infiltrates into the literature to symbolize revolt against any external force that threatens one’s freedom. This revolt motif and the practice of freedom that the myth advocates are identified in McCarthy’s last novel.

McCarthy, in his call for creating a project in life and revolt against the absurd as the way to reincarnate the existential self in his work, relies on appropriating the myth of the fire carrier, Prometheus. Initially, the impacts that the postapocalyptic environment has on the self are intensely profound since it leads to a nihilistic perception of life, just as seen with the mother. Therefore, the man endeavors to protect his son not only from the shock waves of his mother’s suicide but even from the reality around him, as illustrated in the following quotes

“I wish I was with my mom.”

⁴⁷⁵ Luttrull, “Prometheus Hits,” 17.

⁴⁷⁶ Roland Ball, “Le Thème de Prométhée Dans la Littérature Européenne by Raymond Trousson, Prometheus: Archetypal Image of Human Existence by Károly Kerényi and Ralph Manheim: Das Prometheus symbol in der Dichtung der Englischen Romantik by Christian Kreutz,” *Comparative Literature* 21, no. 1 (Winter, 1969): 77, doi: <https://doi.org/10.2307/1769371>

⁴⁷⁷ Ball, “Le Thème de Prométhée,” 77.

He didnt answer. [...] After a while he said: “You mean you wish that you were dead.”

“Yes.”

“You musnt say that.”

“But I do.”

“Dont say it. It’s a bad thing to say.”

“Where are we?” he said. “What is it, Papa?”

“Nothing. We’re okay. Go to sleep.”

[...] “Nothing bad is going to happen to us. That’s right. Because we’re carrying the fire.”

“Yes. Because we’re carrying the fire.”⁴⁷⁸

In the first quote, the father remains silent after the declaration of his son, in order to grant him more time to reconsider his words. However, the reformulation of the boy’s statement is meant to read his mind and externalize his repressed emotions. Accordingly, when the man realizes the infiltration of nihilism into the boy’s mind, he changes his tone with him. Words like “musnt”, and “don’t” reveal the imperative mode in the father’s speech which is meant to instruct the boy to give up on dark ideas haunting his thinking. Alternatively, he relies on the myth of the fire carriers to be the project of their existence which is intentionally implanted in the boy’s mind to show him the importance of fighting for survival. However, McCarthy does not reveal the moment the man first initiates the myth to the boy. In this regard, the second quote previously stated is the first reference to the myth. The boy first refers to the myth and equates it to their well-being and survival from the cannibal’s hands. This perception is evident through his affirmative sentences seeking confirmation from his father, for instance, he says: ‘Nothing bad is

⁴⁷⁸ McCarthy, *The Road*, 47-70.

going to happen to us. That's right.'⁴⁷⁹ Hence, the boy's perception of the myth is put in parallel with their well-being; a vision that is approved by the father as well. Similarly, Daniel Luttrull declares that the father-son conversation about carrying the fire "establishes a sense of security. The boy is safe from the unknown."⁴⁸⁰

Cormac McCarthy's use of "the fire" alludes to the myth of Prometheus which is appropriated to indicate the creation of a project in the life of the characters who choose to pursue their freedom as they revolt against the absurd world, which requires the birth of new types of characters with a rebellious nature. Thus, McCarthy departs from the traditional understanding of the myth to reveal his own vision of Prometheus. Therefore, the Promethean figures he creates endure the suffering of postapocalyptic life, seeking survival in a world inhabited by humanlike creatures. In this regard, the myth is a motif that pushes them to fight or oppose the dominant value system of the devastated land. In other words, the main characters reject cannibalism, which is imposed on the other survivors by the postapocalyptic circumstances, to forge their own mythical ideals. Accordingly, being the fire carriers helps them to define their selves as the "Good Guys" in contrast to the other road travelers, as ⁴⁸¹is demonstrated in the following lines

"Just tell me. We wouldnt ever eat anybody, would we?"

"No. Of course not."

[...] "No matter what."

"No. No matter what."

"Because we're the good guys."

"Yes."

"And we're carrying the fire."

⁴⁷⁹ McCarthy, *The Road*, 70.

⁴⁸⁰ Luttrull, "Prometheus Hits," 22.

⁴⁸¹ Luttrull, "Prometheus Hits," 23.

“And we’re carrying the fire. Yes.”⁴⁸²

The second allusion to the myth of Prometheus reveals a change in the understanding of the fire-carrier by the two main characters. As discussed previously, the boy believes that to carry a fire is a holy mission that guarantees their safety; however, the above quote reveals the birth of a free rebellious self with its own ethics amid the chaos. To put it another way, the realization that man is condemned to be free and his struggle for survival on the road, empowered by a keen desire to create oneself, are all revealed in his rebellion against the meaninglessness of the post-apocalypse, which, eventually, announces the reincarnation of the self that is able to cope with the new horrific reality. Hence, the boy defines his self and his father as “the good guys”⁴⁸³ in contrast to the cannibals who surrender to the jungle rule in their revolt against the absurd, while they lose their humanity. However, this is not the case with the boy and his father, who develop a new ethical self to stand against the chaos of their world. Likewise, this vision is similar to Luttrull’s interpretation of the boy’s self-definition. The former suggests that “The boy’s now evolving definition of self, then, depends on a simple morality. He carries the fire, and people who carry the fire abstain from cannibalism. Most people in the boy’s world, like the people in the farmhouse, stay alive by eating others. The boy, however, resolves to maintain his morality.”⁴⁸⁴ Hence, the protagonists’ revolt against the dominant value system of the world they inhabit by generating their own morals since the fire they carry creates from them distinct beings because it helps them to define themselves by contrast with the others as it constitutes the essence of their project in life. This, eventually, leads them to a true sense of the self.

⁴⁸² McCarthy, *The Road*, 108-109.

⁴⁸³ McCarthy, *The Road*, 109.

⁴⁸⁴ Luttrull, “Prometheus Hits,” 23.

The last allusion to the Promethean myth in the father's deathbed unveils another perception of the fire. In other words, the end of the novel divulges the McCarthyian version of the myth. To further elucidate this view, an excerpt from the denouement is required to clarify our interpretation

"This has been a long time coming. Now it's here. Keep going South.[...] You need to find the good guys but you cant take any chances. No chances. Do you hear?"

"I want to be with you."

"You cant. Please. You cant. *You have to carry the fire.*"

[...] "Is it real? The fire?"

"*Yes it is.*"

"Where is it? I dont know where it is."

"Yes you do. *It's inside you. It was always there.*"

"I can see it. Just take me with you. Please."⁴⁸⁵ [Emphasis original]

These words inform us that the symbolic fire, which appears in the conversations of the two main characters at the beginning of the journey southward, is eventually identified within the boy. Therefore, when the father asks his son "*to carry the fire. [...] It's inside you. It was always there.* I can see it",⁴⁸⁶ he declares that the boy is the Promethean figure who endures the suffering of the trip since he is the one to accomplish the mission that he, the man, has begun. Hence, the man abandons the idea of the boy's death since he believes that the seeds of rebellious nature are already planted in this newly born self and makes him ready to face the meaninglessness of the post-apocalypse as we can see in his speech when he confesses that they "were always lucky. You'll be lucky again. You'll see. Just go", "Do everything the way we did it", "You have to

⁴⁸⁵ McCarthy, *The Road*, 234-235.

⁴⁸⁶ McCarthy, *The Road*, 235.

carry the fire”⁴⁸⁷ These short and direct sentences summarize their battle for survival in a quest for an authentic existence. So, the fire identified within the boy stands for the reincarnation of his self; the rebirth of the new Prometheus. At last, the death of the father grants the little boy the freedom which announces the resurrection of the young rebel who never surrenders to death or loneliness; rather, he bears the pain of the loss of his father to start over a new adventure with new fire-carriers. This perception is better illustrated in the following lines when the narrator notes that “He sat there a long time weeping and then he got up and walked out through the woods to the road”. [...] “You can stay here with your papa and die, or you can go with me”⁴⁸⁸. To conclude, McCarthy appropriates the myth of Prometheus to fit with the plot of his work and to expound his perception that man is free to create himself and to choose his project in life, which constitutes its essence.

Lastly, these differences in the exposition of the concepts of freedom of choice and revolt constitute the specificities of each narrative. However, there exist a number of similarities that bind them together. First of all, *The Road* by McCarthy and *Native Son* by Wright are built upon the same philosophical foundation. Both writers link the shift to revolt to the presence of death in their lives. In *The Road*, McCarthy informs us that the death of the nihilist mother makes the father choose to live and abandon the old thoughts of committing suicide and killing his son to avoid future suffering. This perception is also highlighted after the death of the father, when we find a ten-year-old boy, who used to be obsessed with the fear of death, taking the oath to carry the fire, which his father instilled in his heart, to the South. So, death generates a sense of revolt in other selves. The same perception is evident in *Native Son*. Furthermore, Bigger’s rebellious self comes into existence the moment he realizes the death of Mary Dalton. To put it another

⁴⁸⁷ McCarthy, *The Road*, 234-235.

⁴⁸⁸ McCarthy, *The Road*, 236-238.

way, death awakens a sense of revolt in another self and leads to its reincarnation. On the other hand, *Suttree* and *The Outsider* are also bound by the same plot line. Both protagonists are intellectuals and used to be obsessed with the fear of death. They end up undergoing a death experience that makes them confess the facticity of death and choose life. This experience grants them the freedom to reconstruct their selves and rearrange their world.

To conclude, this chapter is an attempt to demonstrate the effects of the absurd on the self and the way the latter reacts to it. It, therefore, offers an analysis of the different reactions of the self to the meaninglessness of life suggested by McCarthy and Wright. The chapter is divided into two parts. The first examines the escapist reaction in *The Road*, *Suttree*, *Native Son*, and *The Outsider*. It reveals the way suffering may generate nihilism and exclude any other possibilities in life, then the character ends up committing suicide since he or she believes that it is the way to put an end to that absurd as we have seen in *The Road*. While *Suttree* suggests another facet that shows the extent to which man's obsession with the dead may lead him to desire death and think about suicide as a relief to his shattered self. However, the Wrightian fiction pictures "the human condition through black characters, representing black individuals, even those facing oppressive conditions and violent treatment, as all-too-human embodiments of universal motifs."⁴⁸⁹ Accordingly, he represents the dominant reaction of his people to their miserable existence. In other words, he highlights the submissiveness of blacks, which, according to him, is rooted in their culture and inherited ethics. In this regard, both *Native Son* and *The Outsider* deal with philosophical suicide, while the last novel goes a step further to expose the disastrous effects of old ethics on the self through the suicide attempt of Cross Damon. Hence, Wright and McCarthy confess that escapism from the absurd through death, be it physical through suicide or

⁴⁸⁹Shelby, "Freedom in A Godless and Unhappy World: Wright as *Outsider*," 122.

philosophical through the sacrifice of the mind and the self, is a failure and a wrong choice because the absurd never ends with the death of the self. On the other hand, they link the shift from submission or nihilism to the freedom of action and revolt to death itself. And this is the concern of the second part of the chapter. The two concepts are extensively discussed in the four novels. Additionally, emphasis is put on exposing freedom of choice and revolt as the only possible reactions that announce the rebirth of free, rebellious selves that are able to defeat the absurdity of life.

Wright and McCarthy conclude by rejecting surrender, which is evident in advocating the practice of freedom and challenging the absurd through revolt. This view leads us to delve into another issue to demonstrate the essence of this freedom and the way the rebellious self comes to dominance in their fiction. In other words, to understand the way Wright and McCarthy advocate the reincarnation of the self, an investigation of the concept of the death of God is required. It is in the next chapter that we detail all the ideas related to this matter.

CHAPTER THREE:

**“GOD OR NO GOD”: THE DEATH OF GOD AND THE REINCARNATION OF THE
SELF IN THE SELECTED NOVELS OF RICHARD WRIGHT AND CORMAC
MCCARTHY**

Sartre does not only advocate the freedom of choice, but he even goes further to define man as ‘freedom’ who is, in his sight, “condemned to be free.”⁴⁹⁰ This implies that the freedom he attributed to man is unlimited except by the freedom of another for-itself. Since he believes that “existence precedes essence”⁴⁹¹, for him, man is free to create himself and the meaning he desires for his life. This is mainly due to his belief that God is dead and man is thrown into an absurd world in which he has to be its ruler and the creator of order and meaning if he chooses to live and turn his back on nihilistic ideas. In other words, Sartre assumes that the death of God is a fact that makes everything lawful, and when man grasps this reality, at this stage, he grows to be conscious of his ultimate freedom, which inaugurates him as the new master of a Godless world. So, the death of God generates the rebirth of the new free man. This perspective echoes the one promoted by Camus, who juxtaposes the freedom of man with the existence of God. He considers man to be the assassin of God and his heir on earth.⁴⁹² Since his call for revolt is a mere quest for order and a purpose in life, he grants his absurd hero the freedom to move to action, like Dr. Rieux in *The Plague*, at the expense of the death of God. Young claims that the absurdity of life for Albert Camus requires “the death, not just of the Christian, but rather of *all* versions of ‘God’.”⁴⁹³ [emphasis original] which suggests that religious faith is no longer comforting since he considers it irrational. Additionally, Thomas Merton’s assumptions in the essay entitled *Camus and the Church* proves all that has been said above about the religious stance of Camus, which is summed up as follows “if there are evil and suffering in the world, and if God is omnipotent, then the fact that He permits the evil must mean that He is responsible for it. And if the evil has to

⁴⁹⁰ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay in Phenomenological Ontology*, Trans. Hazel Barnes (New York, New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), 441.

⁴⁹¹ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 568.

⁴⁹² Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, Trans. Justin O’Brien (New York: Random House, 1955), 70.

⁴⁹³ Young, *The Death of God*, 162.

exist in order somehow to justify the divine omnipotence, then Camus will return his ticket to paradise; he doesn't want to go there if it means admitting that this is 'right'.”⁴⁹⁴ Camus considers the death of God the only means that may liberate the rebellious self from all constraints, and its revolt is a mere challenge to God Himself, as does Sisyphus. A view which is not far from the one highlighted in the Sartrean discourse.

We have argued in the previous chapters that Wright and McCarthy demonstrate that alienating oneself from the absurd reality and escaping into an imaginative world can never draw an end to the suffering of man and to his inner crises, so they have thrown light on two main options that one can go for in his struggle against the absurdity of life. First, surrender either by committing suicide or going for philosophical suicide by accepting the comfort that faith in God offers is an act of cowardice that both novelists have criticized and rejected. Second, the freedom of choice that Sartre suggests and the revolt that Camus has called for are adopted by both McCarthy and Wright to be the only way that allows man to defeat the absurd. It is through these two concepts that the Southern writers attempt to reveal the reincarnation of the self. Simultaneously, such a perspective can never be accurate and complete without the examination of the concept of God's death because the two previous notions are interrelated with the latter. Accordingly, the current chapter argues that revolt and freedom of choice are a form of rebirth of the self which all depends on the death of God. Hence, this part of the thesis seeks to prove the findings of the previous chapter by revealing the death of God in the selected novels of both writers through the analysis of the literary techniques they relied on which undoubtedly leads to confirm the reincarnation of the self.

⁴⁹⁴ Thomas Merton, “Camus and the Church,” in *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, ed. Brother Patrick Hart (New York: A New Directions Book, 1981), 266

The choice of approaching the god concept in the corpus through literary techniques is due to the fact that techniques can be easily identified and studied. They are “the only means he [writer] has of discovering, exploring, developing his subject, of conveying its meaning, and, finally, of evaluating it.”⁴⁹⁵ Therefore, the plot, the setting, the character, and the theme are said to be the main ingredients of the work of art; the techniques that bring them into dialogue are what create the art of the work itself. Camus and Sartre have brought their philosophy into fiction in the most fashionable way, which has made from their works canonical texts in literature. Works like *The Stranger*, *The Plague*, *The Fall*, *Nausea*, *The Wall*, *The Roads to Freedom* (trilogy), and others have become pretexts for many writers. Camus and Sartre have relied on different techniques in amalgamating philosophy with literature, each with his distinct style and unique perspective that determine the choice of techniques to rely on. In other words, every artist makes his own choices in the selection of the techniques that serve his aim. Since the choice is much more subjective and differs from one writer to the other, exposing the techniques that Sartre and Camus rely on is beyond the scope of this doctoral thesis. Hence, the research proposes a projection of their discourse on its corpus as well as demonstrates that the selected writers, Wright and McCarthy, follow the same stream of thought as Sartre and Camus.

I. “When Gods Die” in the Fiction of Richard Wright

1. Wright and the Christian Faith

“I simply rejected religion. I rejected God. Not my instincts, but my deepest feelings revolted compulsively- not because I was I, a sort of neutral human stuff reacting directly to experience, but because I was a *Negro*”⁴⁹⁶ [Emphasis added]

-J. Saunders Redding.

⁴⁹⁵Mark Schorer, *Technique as Discovery* (London, London: Mcmillan, 1998), 67.

⁴⁹⁶J. Saunders Redding, *On Being Negro in America* (Indianapolis: Charter Books, 1962)

The fictional and non-fictional productions of Richard Wright nominate him as one of the main literary figures of all time who directs a sharp critique of Western religious doctrine due to his philosophical perception of man's status in the world. He is among those who believe that "Philosophy has thus placed itself in opposition to Religion"⁴⁹⁷ because of his critical stance on the institution that has designated Blacks as mentally, culturally, and intellectually inferior. Regardless of the fact that Richard Wright is a self-educated black writer, his committed art reveals a notable assessment of the concept of God for Afro-Americans. Therefore, the issue of faith has infiltrated into all his works because of his intention to universalize the so-called 'Negro problem', utilizing a black character who epitomizes the modern man.

The genesis of Wright's atheistic position dates back to his early years in the South. Hence, the reference to some of the ideas exposed in his memoir, *Black Boy*, is significant in the understanding of the diverse techniques the writer relies on in deconstructing the sacrament of the Christian faith in his fictional works. Going through the pages of *Black Boy* makes us realize that it essentially aims to elaborate on two main issues: the young Richard's inner conflict due to the void generated by the discrepancy between his religious inclination and that of the rest of the family members in addition to the suffering of the segregated blacks in racist America. Though the autobiography reveals the writer's confession of the strict religious education he received in his early childhood, the shift in his belief is openly expressed in different instances, as when Wright writes, "I began to be aware of myself as a distinct personality striving against others..."⁴⁹⁸ The distinction between the self and the other promotes the theological differences

⁴⁹⁷Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures On The History Of Philosophy*, trans. E. S. Halda. Ne (London: London, 1892), 65.

⁴⁹⁸Richard Wright, *Later Works: Black Boy (American Hunger), The Outsider*, ed. R. Arnold (New York: Library of America, 1991), quoted in Sylvester Johnson, "Tribalism and Religious Identity in the Work of Richard Wright," *Literature & Theology* 20 no. 2, (2006): 173

between Wright and other black southerners, including his family as a part of this large group. This opposition to the dominant religious doctrine has made Wright a target of persecution, especially within the borders of his humble dwelling in Mississippi. In other words, Mrs. Wilson, Wright's grandmother, the representative of the religious authority in the house, believes in the compulsion of prayers since it is the means of salvation, especially for young Richard, whose rejection of her faith grows harsher. Mostly, it is this fanaticism that has shaped the perception of her grandchild's literature to be seen as a sort of evil, as recorded by Wright when he was once caught reading with his houseguest, Ella, to order them to "stop that evil, you gal... [I] want none of that devil stuff in my house."⁴⁹⁹ Therefore, all attempts to make Wright accept the dominant religion by coercion, in addition to the persecution he endured, did nothing more than strengthen the view that his unwilling prayers with his grandmother and even with his religious mother would never reach their imaginary heaven due to the meaninglessness of their faith, in his sight. Therefore, the presence of these religious females in Wright's life plays a distinct role in the construction of his conceptualization of God in the lives of the Afro-Americans. In this regard, Calloway argues that Richard Wright "saw his grandmother's religion as typical of the wider "primitive" black religious beliefs."⁵⁰⁰ This reality, however, leaves its imprint on Wright, the writer, since it helped to develop his skills of decoding religious symbols and then bringing them into his fiction, as reviewed by his biographer Fabre⁵⁰¹.

⁴⁹⁹Wright, *Later Works*, quoted in Johnson, "Tribalism and Religious identity," 173.

⁵⁰⁰Jamall A. Calloway, "Wright and Religion," in *Richard Wright in Context*, ed. Michael Nowlin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 155.

⁵⁰¹Michel Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright*, trans. By Isabel Baizan (New York: William Morrow, 1973), 35.

Faith has never been considered a matter of controversy in the Wrightian scholarship, as it is with Cormac McCarthy, due to the former's clear declaration of his religious beliefs. In a nonfictional work entitled *White Man, Listen!* Wright says

I was born a black Protestant in that most racist of all American states: Mississippi. I lived my childhood under a racial code, brutal bloody, that white man proclaimed was ordained of God, said was mandatory by nature of their religion. Naturally, I rejected that religion and would reject any religion which prescribes for me an inferior position in life; I reject that tradition and any tradition which prescribes my humanity.⁵⁰²

The reliance on simple and direct sentences principally aims to put emphasis on the idea being delivered, which is the case in the above quote. Wright's proclamation is an expression of his conceptualization of religion in American society. As an Afro-American citizen, before being a writer, the concept of religion for him is a means to enact Negro subjectivism and impose unconditional white supremacy over black native sons. In other words, he perceives the Christian religion as a means of control and dominance over the Other. Therefore, Wright's rejection of all organized religions, be it tribal or Christian, is out of his keen desire to enjoy his freedom and create an essence to his existence. Calloway, in his book-length study of religion in the works of Wright, argues that "Wright believed that Christianity ingrained a life-threatening theology into the world."⁵⁰³ Accordingly, the disposal of the Protestant ethics he received in his childhood is a natural response from an intellectual who is not only aware of the absurdity of his life but who also seeks order and meaning away from the leap of faith, since it is "an unethical act of an intellect"⁵⁰⁴ as Lackey suggests.

⁵⁰² Richard Wright, "Traditional and Industrialization," in *White Man, Listen!* (California: Harper Collins Books, 1957): 55.

⁵⁰³ Calloway, "Wright and Religion," 158.

⁵⁰⁴ Michael Lackey, *African American Atheists and Political liberation: A Study of the Sociocultural Dynamics of Faith* (Florida: University press of Florida, 2007), 1.

The racial segregation and the lack of opportunities have compelled the Afro-Americans to fall into the trap of Christianity, seeking solace and evading nihilism. Wright's nonfiction portrays this historical reality through his grandmother, Mrs. Wilson, and his mother, Mrs. Wright, who escaped to the Christian religion to give value and meaning to their existence. In other words, Wright criticizes the leap of faith or what Albert Camus terms 'philosophical suicide' as an outlet or source of meaning to a senseless life in the South. So, Camus's conceptualization of philosophical suicide can be traced in the works of Wright because both believe in the inadequacy of religion as a solution to the absurdity of human existence. For that reason, the latter's fiction exposes a negative representation of black female characters due to their own religious beliefs, which are later imposed on the younger generation to, eventually, end up indoctrinating black slaves with no freedom and no future. It is this reality that Wright strongly opposes in his works by taking the opposite stream of thoughts; kill God and seek an alternative, because for him, even if God exists, "that God hates Black people and their life is unequivocal proof of "His" scorn."⁵⁰⁵

The death of God requires an alternative, and Wright sided with the communists as was the case with Camus and, to a lesser extent, Sartre. The communists promote atheism since they believe that religion is nothing more than opium for man and that freedom is a legal right for every individual. These ideals have attracted not only Wright but many other intellectuals. However, due to the fact that the Afro-American writer refuses to be organized, the retreat from the party comes after his realization that Communism is nothing more than a derivation of the White racist belief. In this regard, Tara T. Green's analysis of the power of religion in the works of Wright better illustrates our standpoint, who said that "For Wright, who rejected religion

⁵⁰⁵Calloway, "Wright and Religion," 153.

which “proscribed his humanity,” the Communist Party is to racism as fuchsia is to pink. ... Organized system of beliefs -Religion and the Communist Party- were both ways to control and to master its believers.”⁵⁰⁶ Hence, the Existential doctrine was the option that went with his convictions, especially after he migrated to Paris, where he established a good friendship with Sartre, and De Beauvoir, and then he later encountered Camus.

The early Christian background has genuinely influenced the Wrightian style due to the presence of diverse religious symbols and imagery. Wright’s conscious use of the Biblical language is interpreted by Tara Green as a means to develop his themes, as it may be one way to appeal to his readers.⁵⁰⁷ However, if we take into consideration the fact that the religious inclinations of Wright are known even to his readers, and the tone he relies on when it comes to God is a bit harsh and might be unwelcome by those faithful Blacks. So, Green’s argument may not be persuasive to a larger extent except when she claims that religious symbols are necessary for the development of themes in the novels. While Robert Butler has suggested a distinct remark when analyzing *Native Son*, claiming that the writer’s intention behind the use of the Christian motifs is merely “for ironic purposes.”⁵⁰⁸ To put it another way, Wright, like McCarthy, aims to profane these symbols not only to show his disregard for God but to announce to the Whites that their weapon of indoctrination is, eventually, devoid of any meaning and power. Lastly, this perception is delivered through diverse literary techniques in both *Native Son* and *The Outsider*. Thus, it is the concern of the following section to delve into details of the techniques that allude to the death of God which consequently declares the reincarnation of the rebellious self in the two selected works.

⁵⁰⁶Tara T. Green, “That Preacher’s Going to Eat all the Chicken!” Power and Religion in Richard Wright,” Phd diss., Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College, 2000, 165.

⁵⁰⁷Green, “Power and Religion in Richard Wright,” 2.

⁵⁰⁸Robert Butler, *Native Son: The Emergence of a New Black Hero* (New York: Twayne, 1991), 94.

2. The Sacred No More: Literary Techniques Proclaiming the Reincarnation of the Self through God's Death in *Native Son* and *The Outsider*

The concept of faith in the fiction of Wright has been diversely dealt with by critics since the publication of his first novel, *Native Son*. In *Christian Heroes and Anti-Heroes in Richard Wright's Fiction* Raman K. Singh once assumes that no one denies the Southern writer's rejection of the Christian faith in his oeuvre, but he assumes that what requires more intention is that Wright was "interested in accepting certain aspects of Christianity with a view to offering a redefinition of it."⁵⁰⁹ In other words, he perceives this rejection as a selection of some religious aspects that have undergone a redefining process through fiction. His study principally aims at tracing the progress of the discourse of Wright.⁵¹⁰ He concludes that Wright's works reveal a dual vision that combines ideas with ideologies.⁵¹¹

Claudia C. Tate has also written an article discussing Christianity in Wright's last novel entitled *The Outsider*, where she presupposes that the work exposes the writer's obsession with the European school of thought known; Existentialism.⁵¹² The analysis she offers to the inner crises of the narrative's protagonist, Damon, is based on the theoretical ideas of the Christian existentialist, Søren Kierkegaard. She, therefore, interprets Damon's dilemmas relying on the concept of 'dread' and its antithetical 'despair' detailed by Kierkegaard.⁵¹³ She argues that, regardless of the Afro-American writer's atheism, he has intentionally adapted the existentialist

⁵⁰⁹Raman K. Singh, "Christian Heroes and Anti-Heroes in Richard Wright's Fiction," *Negro American Literature Forum* 6, no. 4 (1972): 99.

⁵¹⁰Singh, "Christian Heroes and Anti-Heroes in Richard Wright's Fiction," 99.

⁵¹¹Singh, "Christian Heroes and Anti-Heroes in Richard Wright's Fiction," 104.

⁵¹² Claudia C. Tate, "Christian Existentialism in Richard Wright's 'The Outsider'," *CLA Journal* 25, no. 4 (1982): 372.

⁵¹³Tate, "Christian Existentialism in Richard Wright's 'The Outsider'," 379.

perspective of the Danish philosopher in constructing the psychological transformation of his main character.⁵¹⁴

Jamall A. Calloway once claims that Richard Wright's perception of religion is principally based on "the significance of religion for poor Black adherents and the insufficiency of any religion for Black devotees in the context of a White supremacist world."⁵¹⁵ He believes that the genesis of the religious discourse that Wright's fiction exposes is entirely based on his conviction that political and religious thinking are inseparable.⁵¹⁶ In other words, religion was a tool to indoctrinate Black subordination. This indoctrination, according to him, is facilitated by "Black mothers and Black male preachers."⁵¹⁷ Hence, Calloway suggests that the reason behind Wright's rejection of Christianity and his disregard to God is mainly due to his conviction that religion is a coercive means in the hands of that group of religious mothers and preachers, which only serves the White supremacy.⁵¹⁸

However, all that has been written about religion or the concept of God in *Native Son* and *The Outsider* is the outcome of the analysis of the characters' deeds and beliefs. None has explored the theme from the angle of the literary techniques used by the writer as an expression of atheism, even those who have dealt with it from an existential perspective, like Calloway or Singh.

After having discussed Wright's perspective on the concept of God in the first section, this part of the research primarily aims to examine and demonstrate the link between the death of God and the rebirth of the rebellious Black self in his *Native Son* and *The Outsider* by analyzing

⁵¹⁴Tate, Christian Existentialism in Richard Wright's "The Outsider", 394.

⁵¹⁵Calloway, "Wright and Religion," 150.

⁵¹⁶Calloway, "Wright and Religion," 150.

⁵¹⁷Calloway, "Wright and Religion," 152.

⁵¹⁸Calloway, "Wright and Religion," 152.

some of the major techniques that stand for this stream of thought. Though the issue of religion in the two novels has already been explored from different angles, the perspective that this doctoral thesis seeks to offer is innovative in the sense that it creates an analogy between the selection of the techniques used in the development of the narration and the author's philosophical intention. Starting first by analyzing the techniques used in *Native Son* is important in the assessment of the Wrightian doctrine in the early phase of writing, compared to the Parisian phase when moving to *The Outsider*.

2.1. "I Want to Be Happy in *this* World": Killing God in the Narrative of Bigger Thomas

The curse of God in the literature of Wright has seen light even before his departure to Paris and his companionship with Camus, Sartre, and even De Beauvoir. So, his early works are characterized by "an unconscious existentialism"⁵¹⁹ as suggested by Russell Carl Brignano. Works like *Native Son*, which was published in 1940, is what makes such an argument more persuasive. It is a novel that tackles the 'Negro problem' in a distinct fashion because of the unconscious infiltration of the so-called existential discourse into the overall structure of the narrative. In other words, Richard Wright has always been existential even before having met the existentialist leading figures in France. Years later, the Wrightian philosophical perception of life finds its echoes in existential dogmas to be, eventually, fused within the mainstream of thought. Therefore, the narrative style and the development of themes in the literary production are shaped by his religious beliefs. This leads us to shed light on some of the religious symbols and narrative

⁵¹⁹Russell Carl Brignano, *Richard Wright: An Introduction to the Man and His Works* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1970): 123.

choices used in *Native Son* in an attempt to explore the concept of God in the novel that helps to elucidate the way the Black self is reincarnated in fiction.

2.1.1. Symbolism Revealing the Murder of God in *Native Son*

2.1.1.1 Bigger Thomas

The rise of the novel makes the act of creation a manifestation of individual freedom in recreating reality from one's own perspective. This view was also promoted, to a certain extent, by Camus and Sartre through their philosophical writings as well as fiction. They consider the artist as a generator of a parallel, but an imperfect world that echoes his chaotic life. It is the same conception that *Native Son* offers through its main character, Bigger Thomas. In this regard, Wright declares that "for a long time I toyed with the idea of writing a novel in which a Negro Bigger Thomas would loom as a symbolic figure of American life, a figure who would hold within him the prophecy of our future."⁵²⁰ Bigger is not a simple character used in the construction of a narrative about the Black suffering in the South, but he is the voice that vocalizes the Wrightian doctrine in every act and every single word he utters. Also, Wright chooses to universalize the suffering of the modern man through a symbolic character. In this regard, Esther Merle Jackson in his *The American Negro and the Image of the Absurd* claims that "it is, perhaps, fitting that the American Negro should stand as a symbol, a sign, of the total condition of man in the twentieth century [...] the Negro is the very ground of the human conflict in our time."⁵²¹ Wright's Bigger personifies the ideals of the modern man in fiction.

⁵²⁰Richard Wright, *Native Son* (New York: Harper Collins e-books, 2009), 338.

⁵²¹Esther Merle Jackson, "The American Negro and the Image of the Absurd," *Phylon* 23, no. 4 (1962): 359.

A careful examination of the novel does not only reveal the fictionalization of the writer's early life, but also his religious inclinations are clearly identified through Bigger's attitudes toward the concept of God. The novel's first scene exposes a discrepancy between Mrs. Thomas' religious beliefs and those of her elder son, Bigger. In this regard, Wright writes

His mother's voice floated to him in song.

Life is like a mountain railroad

With an engineer that's brave

We must take the run successful

From the cradle to the grave

The song irked him and he was glad when she stopped.

[...] Lord, we thank Thee for the food You done placed before us for the nourishment of our bodies. Amen. ⁵²²

The mother's biblical song seems absurd to Bigger and is unable to fuel any religious sympathy in his heart. The choice of words like 'irked' and 'glad' in the description of the boy's reaction to his mother's singing divulge, so to speak, his faithlessness. This paradox in the religious inclinations foreshadows impending conflicts within the family. On the other hand, the character's reaction calls to mind a scene from *Black Boy* where Wright recites his response to the prayers before the meal with his mother and grandmother, claiming that his words would never find their way to heaven.

Wright's intention to create a symbolic character who epitomizes the prophecies of the age makes Bigger the voice of Atheism in the narrative. The long discussion between the protagonist and his lawyer, Mr. Max, is one of the main scenes where the issue of faith is openly discussed. At first, Bigger makes a parallelism between the white man's dictatorship and the

⁵²²Wright, *Native Son*, 21.

supreme power of the Christian God, assuming that the Whites “own everything, they choke you off the face of the earth. They like God [...] they don’t even let you feel what you want to feel [...] they kill you before you die.”⁵²³ This imagery alludes to the deprived freedom of the Blacks which has generated their slavish status in society. Bigger believes that the Whites have the authority to run the lives of the other race and enslave them. This authority is, in fact, deep-rooted in their religion, which was used as a means of control. In other words, he assumes that white people strive to make Blacks “religious, then they can do what they want to with”⁵²⁴ them. Therefore, the figurative death of the Blacks originates in the lack of freedom, which was violated by the Whites and their God. This stance stimulates Mr. Max to ask Bigger whether he believes in God, to which the latter responds, “I don’t know. [...] I’ll be dead soon enough. If I was religious, I’d be dead now.”⁵²⁵ The protagonist declares his faithlessness and distances himself from his people whom he considers “whipped folks”⁵²⁶ who believe in the eternal life that the church promises. Bigger justifies his rejection of Christianity by declaring to his lawyer that he “wanted to be happy in this world, not out of it.”⁵²⁷

Book three of the novel directs a harsh critique of the Christian dogmas when Wright confronts the symbols of both Atheism and Christianity. Initially, the black preacher Reverend Hammond’s visit to Bigger at the jail is an attempt to save the latter from blasphemy through confession to ensure his repentance. However, Wright’s atheist protagonist shows no respect to the preacher, the representative of the Black Church. The scene is inserted on purpose to criticize the Black Church, which has engraved the slavish mindset in the Black Belt. It also echoes a scene from Camus’ *The Stranger* when the priest visits Meursault for confession before his death

⁵²³ Wright, *Native Son*, 277.

⁵²⁴ Wright, *Native Son*, 280.

⁵²⁵ Wright, *Native Son*, 280.

⁵²⁶ Wright, *Native Son*, 280.

⁵²⁷ Wright, *Native Son*, 280.

sentence, where the former was humiliated by the imprisoned protagonist. In Wright's work, the narrator verbalizes Bigger's inner thoughts when he avers that "he had liked within himself the preacher's haunting image of life even before he had killed Mary; that had been his first murder."⁵²⁸ To put it another way, Bigger has, intentionally, killed God within himself even before his accidental murder of Mary. Accordingly, Wright announces his character to be the murderer of God who dares to kill Him in order to restore his freedom and grant the self the chance to exist without any restraints, be it social, racial, or mythical. Therefore, the death of God and the Other is a rebirth of the Black self.

In conclusion, Richard Wright profanes the Christian faith through an atheist character who stands in opposition to his mother's religion, to the Black Church, and to the white man's faith. Bigger symbolizes the ideals of the modern man who is thrown into an absurd life and left to strive to create his self in accordance with his beliefs. Bigger, who was haunted by existential angst, decides to restore his freedom through the murder of God and then the little Gods, the Whites, to eventually declare the reincarnation of the self in a Godless universe. The novel also comprises other religious symbols, to name but a few: the church, the priest, and the cross.

2.1.1.2. The Church

Wright's religious upbringing makes him attentive to the choice of religious symbols to use in his fiction. The selection is made in accordance with the spiritual weight of the symbol in itself. Accordingly, the church, which constitutes the creed of the Christian faith, is, ironically, present in the 1940 novel of Wright. It stands for the writer's intention to demonstrate that the coalition of the Black Church with the dominant power has exterminated 'the brutes' to borrow Joseph Conrad's description of the Blacks who live under the mercy of the White tyranny. This

⁵²⁸Wright, *Native Son*, 224.

metaphorical death is due to the lack of freedom and oppression they suffer from and are obliged to endure because of the religious ideas promoted by the Black Church. In this regard, Wright inserted a scene where he shows his protagonist listening to a singing group of Blacks in the church to which he “tried not to listen, but it seeped into his feelings, whispering of another way of life and death, coaxing him to lie down and sleep and let them come and get him, urging him to believe that all life was a sorrow that had to be accepted.”⁵²⁹ Through these words, Wright aims to draw the reader’s attention to the way the church helped to instill the slavish mindset into the Blacks, which in turn widens the Whites’ dominance. In other words, the church teaches Blacks to bear their miseries because it is a reality that revolt can never alter, while their ultimate reward will be in the other world. Wright represents the opposition of the church teachings to Bigger’s “deep yearning for a sense of wholeness”⁵³⁰ in order to emphasize the religious disparity between the protagonist and his people. Correspondingly, the end of the scene details these differences through a monologue when Bigger wonders whether “It would have been easy to have lived in it, for it was his mother’s world, humble, contrite, believing. It had a center, a core, an axis, a heart which he needed but could never unless he laid his head upon a pillow of humility and gave up his hope of living in the world. And he would never do that.”⁵³¹ Bigger’s refusal to be brainwashed by some metaphysical promises that encourage him to put aside the aspiration to exist and restore the freedom to recreate a free self is a clear declaration of the rejection of religion and the existence of God as a whole.

Native Son’s protagonist is a character who had a religious upbringing which allows him to give judgments on the dominant religion. Like Wright, Bigger used to go to church in his

⁵²⁹Wright, *Native Son*, 207.

⁵³⁰Wright, *Native Son*, 205.

⁵³¹Wright, *Native Son*, 205.

childhood; an advantage that equips him with considerable knowledge to judge whether to remain religious or abandon the senseless faith that is unable to change his wretched existence. In this regard, when asked about the reason behind his desertion of the church, Bigger answers, “I didn’t like it. There was nothing in it, all they did was sing and shout and pray all the time. And it didn’t get ’em nothing. All the colored folks do that, but it didn’t get ’em nothing.”⁵³² Bigger realizes that the promises of the church are worthless, and even the rituals of its henchmen are perceived as absurd. Hence, Wright is openly promoting the futility of religion for Blacks in America by asserting that Jesus is not their savior and their prayers would never reach the illusory heaven the preachers talk about. This drives us to conclude that he used the church not to symbolize salvation and the sacredness of the Christian faith, but to profane the symbol in itself because it is associated with slavery, passivity, and surrender. Then what comes next further illustrates this reading of the work by drawing attention to another Christian symbol: the Cross.

2.1.1.3. The Cross

The presence of the cross in literature has always been used to symbolize sacrifice, purification, and even salvation. However, *Native Son* offers quite a different symbolism since Wright is known for his opposition to everything related to organized religions. To start with, when the main character is imprisoned for his crimes, there comes a scene of the preacher’s visit to urge him to repent before it is too late and pray for him. The latter’s sermon ends when he “drew from his pocket a small wooden cross with a chain upon it [...] the wooden cross hung next to the skin of Bigger’s chest.”⁵³³ Wright, as a skilled narrator, includes such incidents when the character is in the last stage of his life, days before his death sentence. He, ironically, shows Bigger’s resignation to the black preacher’s words when he agrees to wear the cross. This

⁵³²Wright, *Native Son*, 279.

⁵³³Wright, *Native Son*, 225.

acceptance is significant since it highlights the weakness of Blacks when they opt for God in moments of depression or despair. Since the preacher associates the cross with salvation and the purity of the Christian faith, his words seep into Bigger's mind to light the flames of doubt and hope at the same time. However, a few pages later, Wright reveals the reason behind making his character accept the wooden cross in one of the most critical scenes in the work. He writes of a flaming cross atop a nearby building, which is contrasted with the previous one when Bigger notices the burning of such a sacred symbol. He ponders "The cross the preacher had told him about was bloody, not flaming; meek, not militant. It had made him feel awe and wonder, not fear and panic. [...] but this cross made him want to curse and kill. [...] Had the preacher trapped him? He felt betrayed."⁵³⁴ The paradox in the symbolism of the cross has made Bigger believe that he was hypnotized by the preacher the moment he wore the cross. He burns in anger because he realizes the intended meaning of the flaming cross of the Ku Klux Klan. To put it another way, the purity of the symbol is blemished by the Whites' animality; to burn and kill the rapist Black ape by the civilized Whites who pretend to have the burden to Christianize the pagans. Therefore, this burning cross is used as an "obscene parody of the cross of the Christ,"⁵³⁵ as Patterson suggests. Bigger's awareness of such an inkling justifies his hysterical reaction when "he tore his shirt open, not caring who saw him. He gripped the cross and snatched it from his throat. He threw it away, cursing a curse that was almost a scream."⁵³⁶ The behavior of the protagonist is a harsh critique of Christianity because the act of throwing the cross is not just a mere rejection of religion but a declaration of the corruption of the Christian faith. Accordingly, the refutation of the purity of its sacred symbols is an announcement that religion is a big lie, and the White God

⁵³⁴Wright, *Native Son*, 265-66.

⁵³⁵Orlando Patterson, *Rituals of Blood: Consequences of Slavery in Two American Centuries* (New York: Basic Books, 1998) quoted in Ana María Fraile, *Richard Wright's Native Son*, ed. Michael J. Meyer (New York: Rodopi, 2007), 176.

⁵³⁶Wright, *Native Son*, 266.

who prescribes the humanity of the Blacks does not deserve the respect of either Bigger or Wright.

When we speak about the cross, we generally refer to the priest, the churchman, or even the preacher because they are the ones who teach people its sacredness and the sacrifice of Christ. In this regard, Wright's character does not only profane the cross, but even the preacher was maltreated as the following excerpt demonstrates

"I don't want you!"

"What's the matter, son?"

"Take your Jesus and go!"

"But, son! Yuh don't know whut yuh's sayin'! Lemme pray fer yuh!"

"Pray for yourself!"

[...] "Look, Reverend, he threw his cross away."

The preacher looked and said:

"Son, don't spit in Gawd's face!"

"I'll spit in your face if you don't leave me alone!" Bigger said.⁵³⁷

Bigger's anger made him reject everything associated with religion, not only the cross, but even the preacher, Jesus, and God. This negative representation of the symbols, which are the pillars of the Christian faith, is a clear avowal from Wright that God is dead for him, for his Black character, and for all the Bigger Thomases around the world. So, the freedom restored after being liberated from the religious constraints is a rebirth to the self that embraces every moment of its

⁵³⁷Wright, *Native Son*, 267.

absurd existence. Accordingly, the prison, which is usually associated with freedom deprivation, Wright creates from it “a kind of womb where Bigger is born again.”⁵³⁸

In conclusion, Wright's *Native Son* divulges the writer's intention to shed light on the way religion can determine man's perception of life. Accordingly, the analysis of the religious symbolism in the novel discloses Wright's opposition to organized religions. His reliance on symbolism as a literary technique aims to direct a harsh critique of the Whites' faith that grants them the authority to enslave, dehumanize, and subordinate other humans under the guise of religion. Therefore, the protagonist of the novel- Bigger Thomas- symbolizes atheism as an opposition to the white man's faith; the voice that promotes the death of God and the curse of the symbols of Christianity. He is acclaimed to be Wright's spokesman in the narrative due to the existence of diverse affinities that bound them together, regardless of the religious ones. This section also demonstrates that Wright intends to profane the Christian faith by negatively using its sacred symbols like the church, the cross, and even the preacher. In other words, the church that used to symbolize salvation and the holiness of the Christian faith is desecrated because it is used to symbolize slavery, passivity, and surrender. Additionally, the cross and the preacher were not spared from his criticism since they were disrespected and associated with falsehood. All in all, symbolism is a tool used to represent the lost faith in the chaos that defines our absurd time. It is a technique that allows Wright to artistically infuse his convictions into the work. It also permits him to demonstrate that the Black self is reincarnated the moment it refutes the value or the meaning that faith in God offers to life and goes on to create itself and seek its own meaning, though it is aware of the absurdity of the quest itself. These ideas are also transmitted to the

⁵³⁸Raman K. Singh, “Christian Heroes and Anti-Heroes in Richard Wright's Fiction,” *Negro American Literature Forum* 6, no. 4 (1972): 102.

reader by relying on other techniques like narrative perspective, as revealed in the coming section.

2.1.2. The Divine Through a Splintered Lens: Narrative Perspective in *Native Son*

Since the choice of the narrative perspective from which the story is told encompasses inklings of the writer's philosophical perception of life, the narrative point of view in *Native Son* tells a lot about Wright's religious beliefs. First and foremost, the novel's events are narrated by the third-person-limited narrator, a technique that dominates the whole work. It is known that this narrative perspective allows the writer to describe the plot's events from one specific point of view. In other words, this viewpoint is generally limited to the protagonist of the novel through whom we perceive the events of the work. Going back to *Native Son*, the story is recited from Bigger Thomas' perspective through a narrator who has access to his thoughts and beliefs. This voice smoothly enters into Bigger's mind to tell us that he "With this black skin of his had the two worlds, thought and feelings, will and mind, aspiration and satisfaction, been together; never had he felt a sense of wholeness. [...] a chaos which made him feel that something in him should be able to understand it."⁵³⁹ The quote is one example that shows the narrator's comments on "Bigger's thoughts [which] are actually transcribed rather than translated."⁵⁴⁰ To put it another way, the use of the third-person-limited narrator discloses the character's absurd philosophy in an elegant prose style that is far from the choppy and short statements of Bigger's direct speech.⁵⁴¹ So, the choice of this narrative perspective is a necessity because of the character's poor educational background reflected in his language, which hardens the task of discussing philosophical ideas with his register. As far as the God concept is concerned, the novel consists

⁵³⁹Wright, *Native Son*, 197.

⁵⁴⁰Laura E. Tanner, "Uncovering the Magical Disguise of Language: The Narrative Presence in Richard Wright's *Native Son*," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 29, no. 4 (1987): 114.

⁵⁴¹Tanner, "Uncovering the Magical Disguise of Language," 114.

of many instances where Wright opts for a third-person-limited narration to express Bigger's thoughts when it comes to faith in God, like when he writes, "He hated his mother for that way of hers [religion] which was like Bessie's. What his mother had was Bessie's whiskey, and Bessie's whiskey was his mother's religion."⁵⁴² These words echo Camus' elucidation of one of the escapist forms of the absurd, which he terms 'philosophical suicide'. As explained in the previous chapter, the leap of faith can never end the absurd, but it is nothing more than an announcement of the death of the mind; escapism from the absurd that is a part of our life. In the above quote, Bigger believes that his mother's religion does not differ from the whiskey his girlfriend drinks to forget about her daily suffering. Hence, faith in God, for him, is not the right solution to the senselessness of life because it does not seem to intervene in changing their reality, so it never heals their wounds, just like the whiskey that never exceeds that momentary solace, then man is back to his wretched existence. Accordingly, this narrative perspective, then, does not "go beyond the projective range of Bigger's consciousness"⁵⁴³ as Larsen suggests. All in all, it is the choice that allows Wright to draw generalizations about his character's religious inclinations that mirror the dominant belief of the age.

In conclusion, the analysis of the major literary techniques used in *Native Son* leads us to conclude that the writer expresses his philosophy through the choice of techniques used in developing the themes of his work. The religious symbolism and the narrative perspective have revealed the negative attitudes of Richard Wright toward faith in God. It also proves that the writer makes use of these techniques in order to promote the reincarnation of the Black self who rebels against God and chooses to kill Him just to restore its humanity and the freedom to create

⁵⁴²Wright, *Native Son*, 198.

⁵⁴³ R. B. V. Larsen, "The Four Voices of Richard Wright's *Native Son*," *Negro American Literature Forum* 6, no. 4 (1972): 105.

the desired meaning to one's life. In other words, the death of God declares the rebirth of the rebellious self, which chooses to revolt against its reality and the power of God. This new self chooses the freedom to act and create its own path in life, just like the new Thomas Bigger. The reading of the novel strengthens the assumption that Wright had the same philosophical orientation as his late companions Camus and Sartre, even before getting to know them. Therefore, it is the concern of the following section to further explore this argument in the 1953 novel.

2.2. Deconstructing the Divine: Literary Techniques Unveiling God's Death in The Outsider

The Parisian phase is considered a transitional period in Wright's intellectual career since it was the stage that exposed a cultivated philosophy of the writer due to his involvement with the French existentialists. Therefore, the late work, *The Outsider*, is said to be the refined version of *Native Son* due to the maturity of the ideas that were first introduced to the reader with the earlier novel. Wright has incorporated, in *The Outsider*, his early beliefs with the philosophical notions that Camus and Sartre have developed because all of them flow into the same stream. In this regard, the biographer Fabre describes this phase of Wright's career as "a second maturation, or reorientation, were, in fact, the somewhat confused beginning of Wright's new view, in the fifties, that the salvation of humanity could come only from the third world. Even *The Outsider* was a means of obliterating the past, not of announcing the future."⁵⁴⁴ Hence, the current part of the research delves deeper into one of the main themes in this stream of thought, which is the concept

⁵⁴⁴Michel Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1973) quoted in Robert A. Coles, "Richard Wright's *The Outsider*: A Novel in Transition," *Modern Language Studies* 13, no. 3 (1983): 56.

of God, by tracing Wright's convictions about faith in God through the techniques he used in the construction of his *The Outsider*.

2.2.1. Confessions of the Self: Monologues as a Revelation of Godlessness

The God concept in Wright's *The Outsider* is not a controversial issue since it is a theme that the writer has discussed with an incomparable openness that leaves no chance for ambivalent spirituality to seep into the work. This clarity is achieved through reliance on one of the major techniques that allows philosophical ideas to leak into fiction: monologue. So, the purpose of the current section is not primarily to demonstrate Wright's intention to profane God as seen with *Native Son* or even with McCarthy's novels because it is undeniable, but rather to focus on exposing the way monologues helped him to infiltrate his religious inclinations into the novel in order to promote the rebirth of the self as a result of the death of God.

Critics have described *The Outsider* as a novel of ideas due to the presence of long passages where philosophy dominates the narrative mode. This shift in style is due to the reorientation of the writer's thoughts that characterized his production during his residency in Paris. Accordingly, this philosophical maturity is expressed through the use of monologues that permit the novelist the chance to enter into the character's mind to disclose to the reader the persona's beliefs that justify his behaviors in the work and incorporate his own ideas into those of the fictional characters. Therefore, monologues best fit the expression of the absurdity of life that Wright intends to expose through fiction. This technique often appears in the artistic works of Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre, more specifically in *The Stranger* and *Nausea*, where philosophical concepts are smoothly infused into the narratives. Both Meursault and Roquentin are thoughtful characters whose mind is frequently exposed to us through long monologues. In this regard, Wright in his journal once revealed his admiration for Camus' *The Stranger*,

declaring that “What is of course really interesting in this book is the use of fiction to express a philosophical point of view.”⁵⁴⁵ Then Wright ends up following the same path in *The Outsider*.

Cross Damon is the only intellectual Black character in Wright's novel. It is a proper decision to approach philosophical notions through a character whose philosophy major at university has impelled him to question the very essence of existence. He is “the hungry type of mind that needed only a scrap of an idea to feed upon, to start his analytical process rolling.”⁵⁴⁶ Correspondingly, the Godlessness of the universe is a pivotal issue that captivates Damon's mind throughout the whole narrative. In one of his monologues, his analysis of the concept of power in society drives him to conclude that the communists' disregard of religion grants man more power and authority in life. He thinks that “this systematizing of the sensual impulses of man to be a god must needs to be jealous of all rival systems of sensuality.”⁵⁴⁷ Damon believes that the power systems promote the death of God in human life, just to restore the authority to rule others and be their gods. In other words, the act of killing God results in the birth of a keen desire within the individual to be god. Therefore, the death of God frees the self and grants it the chance to be the dominant power in life: to be a little god. Wright's words echo those of Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* when he defines man, stating that “to be man means to reach toward being God. Or if you prefer, man fundamentally is the desire to be God.”⁵⁴⁸ This means that man is free to choose the way to overcome the absurdity of his existence since the world is devoid of any divine power that may give the chaos meaning. This interpretation compels us to refer to Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, where he says, “Without God[...] All things are lawful then, they can

⁵⁴⁵Michel Fabre, *The Unfinished Quest of Richard Wright*, 2nd ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993) quoted in Tommie Shelby, “Freedom in Godless and Unhappy World” in *The Cambridge Companion to Richard Wright*, ed. by Glenda R. Carpio (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 132.

⁵⁴⁶Richard Wright, *The Outsider* (New York: Harper Collins e-books, 1993), 195.

⁵⁴⁷Wright, *The Outsider*, 196.

⁵⁴⁸Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 566.

do what they like?”⁵⁴⁹ So, the freedom and the authority that man gains after his realization that God does not exist allow him to assume and retain that divine mission in life that used to be associated with God. Going back to *The Outsider*, in the monologue stated above, Wright intends to make an analogy between the two power systems, Communism and religion. In other words, communism creates little gods who are allowed to rule over others, which does not differ from religion that is used as a means of control by the white man in American society. Consequently, Damon’s rejection of religion and insistence on the non-existence of God has inevitably driven him to oppose Communism and the like because he does not accept his humanity to be prescribed. This view finds its echoes in the monologue where Cross Damon recalls his crime against the communist Gil Blount and the fascist Herndon “I killed two little gods... he paused, frowning. But they would have killed me too if they had found me like that [...] he too had acted like a little god. He had stood amidst those red and flickering shadows, tense and consumed with cold rage, and had judged them and had found them guilty of insulting his sense of life and carried out a sentence of death upon them.”⁵⁵⁰ The act of killing the two little gods also alludes to the metaphorical death of God. Therefore, the extermination of all gods has given birth to a new little god to rule: Cross Damon. He stands in a position of power and plays the god role when he decides to take off the souls of the two little gods because his humanity is affronted. In this regard, Shelby perceives Damon’s act as a mere choice to be “a ‘little god’ himself, deciding by a pure act of will what is right and wrong; judging others and dispensing punishment; and treating others either as obstacles to the achievement of his aims or objects to be used to satisfy his cravings.”⁵⁵¹ The crime is, in fact, an expression of the belief that “Gods cannot share power;

⁵⁴⁹Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. by Larissa Volokhonsky and Richard Pevear (1880), 1187.

⁵⁵⁰Wright, *The Outsider*, 223.

⁵⁵¹Shelby, “Freedom in Godless and Unhappy World,” 130.

each god must have all the power or he's no god."⁵⁵² Thus, Wright, eventually, announces the reincarnation of the Black self whose freedom was once restrained by the socio-religious constraints in the early parts of the narrative.

To conclude, Wright's anti-religious beliefs find their path into *The Outsider* through monologues as one way to avoid relegating the artistry of the novel. The work is a confirmation of early existential ideas that appear with the first publications, like *Native Son*. The use of monologues grants the writer more space and freedom to expose his philosophical perception of God. Moreover, the analysis reveals that Wright promotes the freedom of choice while he embraces the Godlessness of life since it allows the new rebellious self to be reborn. The selected literary technique helps in elucidating the serial crimes of Damon that were nurtured by his keen desire to replace the dead God and choose his own way of facing the absurdity of the world: rebelling against his reality and the practice of the freedom to choose. Lastly, the novel consists of other techniques through which Wright goes further in expounding his perspective. Hence, the following section spots light on the dialogic technique for more details on this matter in the work at hand.

2.2.2. Fragments of Faith: A Dialogic Inquiry

The revelation of the atheistic perspective in *The Outsider* while promoting revolt and the practice of freedom of choice as the only way to end the absurd does not only appear in the confessions of the self in the form of monologues, but dialogue plays a crucial role as well. Wright structures weighty conversations between different characters through whom philosophical notions are effortlessly introduced to the reader. Firstly, the discussion between Damon and his religious mother is significant because it reveals the protagonist's disdain for

⁵⁵²Wright, *The Outsider*, 387.

Christian ethics when the mother addresses him, saying, “You’ve sinned, Cross, and it’s to God you must confess with a contrite heart.”⁵⁵³ To these words, the narrator intervenes to transmit to us the ideas haunting the character’s mind as those words resonate, admitting that “he knew that now she was reliving her own experience, grieving over the thwarted hopes that had driven her into the arms of religion for the sake of her sanity. And he? Where could he be driven? Nowhere. His mother was lucky; she had a refuge, even if that refuge was only an illusion. But he could only get out of this world or stay in it and bear it.”⁵⁵⁴ The conversation reveals Wright’s influence by Camus’s idea of philosophical suicide. It divulges the metaphysical death of the mind and the self, as seen in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, when Mrs. Damon finds ‘refuge’ in her “leap of faith”. Moreover, her acceptance of the solace or the comfort that faith offers her is rejected by her son, Cross, who describes her escapism from the chaos of the world as an ‘illusion’. Therefore, Damon rejects and rebels against every coercive force that deprives him of the right to live freely. This rebellious spirit against religion is expressed in the last sentence, where the narrator states, “Stay in it and bear it,”⁵⁵⁵ which alludes to the rejection of all forms of escaping the absurd, be it suicide, or philosophical suicide, and embracing the absurdity of his life while seeking to live authentically. Additionally, in another dialogue between Cross Damon and his friends, Wright uses sarcasm to expose his scorn for God. The following excerpt better illustrates this idea

“Did God really make you, Joe?” Pink demanded.

“Was God absent-minded when he cooked you up, Joe? Booker asked.

.... “God made me, all right. He made my soul and He made my *body* too”.

“but who did He make your body so *fat*, Joe?” Cross asked.

⁵⁵³Wright, *The Outsider*, 37.

⁵⁵⁴Wright, *The Outsider*, 38.

⁵⁵⁵Wright, *The Outsider*, 38.

[...] “and God made man in his own image... “ Pink and Booker yelled with laughter. [...]Cross demanded in a mockingly serious voice: “Did God really make *that* face? Is He guilty of *that*? If He did, then He was walking in His sleep!” Cross shook with laughter. “to blame God for making Joe is to *degrade* the very concept of God.”⁵⁵⁶
[Emphasis Original]

The characters’ laughter at God’s creation is a clear insolence of God Himself and a disregard for His possible presence in life. The use of statements like ‘absent-minded’ and ‘walking in his sleep’ can be used as an expression of rebellion against the divine authority and a confession of God’s abandonment of man on earth. Therefore, the end of the conversation is a clear declaration on the tongue of Cross Damon when he claims that ‘to blame God for making Joe is to degrade the very concept of God.’⁵⁵⁷ This philosophically dosed sentence foreshadows other affirmations that come by the end of the narrative. In this regard, Damon-Blimin and Damon-Houston's dialogues are said to be the most philosophical in the whole work due to the fact that all characters share the same religious inclinations. It is in the first conversation that Wright analyzes the religious status of the man of the age, admitting that “most men today are atheists, even though they don’t know it or won’t admit it. They live, dream, and plan on the assumption that there is no God [...] it means that God no longer really concerns us as a reality beyond life.”⁵⁵⁸ The use of the generalized tone here intends to invite the reader to identify himself with the characters so the death of God can be effortlessly imposed on him. This narrative technique allows the Wrightian doctrine to be exposed through communication between the literary personas who share with him the same religious convictions. What is unique about *The Outsider* is the use of white characters to transmit the writer’s philosophy. The district attorney, Mr. Houston, plays a significant role in the narrative since he is the one who can offer a critical

⁵⁵⁶Wright, *The Outsider*, 26.

⁵⁵⁷Wright, *The Outsider*, 26.

⁵⁵⁸Wright, *The Outsider*, 333.

interpretation of Damon's crimes, attitudes, and beliefs. It is through this white man that Richard Wright announces his adoption of the Sartrean dogmas when the former addresses Damon, exclaiming, "How magnificently you tossed away this God who plagues and helps man so much! But you did not and could not toss out of your heart that part of you from which the God notion had come. And that part of a man is that! It is desire [...] Man desires ultimately to be a God ... Man desires everything..."⁵⁵⁹ Houston admires the nature of Cross and considers him exceptional as he elevates him to the status of a true God because of his success in manipulating his desire in the "little godly game."⁵⁶⁰ Wright's statement, 'Man desires ultimately to be a God,'⁵⁶¹ is a paraphrasing of Sartre's, 'Man fundamentally is the desire to be God.'⁵⁶² This desire to be a god is an attempt to fill the void left by man's realization of the death of God and the absurdity of life. This necessitates the rebirth of the new rebellious self that creates and imposes its own laws and meaning on the Godless universe.

Eventually, this part of the chapter attempts to explore the link between the God concept and the reincarnation of the self in Richard Wright's *Native Son* and *The Outsider*. The analysis is conducted from an innovative perspective relying on exploring the literary techniques the writer uses in transmitting his philosophical perception of the issue of God and proving the rebirth of the self that assumes the God role in a Godless universe and decides to strive to create a meaning to life through revolt and the freedom of choice. The analysis of religious symbolism used in *Native Son* divulges the writer's rejection of organized religions because he perceives them as a means of control and enslavement. This standpoint is further illustrated through the narrative point of view utilized in reciting the events of the plot and exposing the anti-religious attitudes of

⁵⁵⁹Wright, *The Outsider*, 385.

⁵⁶⁰Wright, *The Outsider*, 386.

⁵⁶¹Wright, *The Outsider*, 386.

⁵⁶²Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 566.

the novelist. This section, also, proves that the writer makes use of these techniques in order to promote the reincarnation of the Black self who kills God just to restore its humanity through revolt and the freedom to create the desired meaning to one's life. Additionally, Wright's desire for freedom and egalitarianism has erupted in him the opposition to other systems such as Communism and Fascism, as seen in *The Outsider*. These socio-political systems are equated with religion because they all generate slavery and prescribe the humanity of the minority group, Blacks. The monologue is the technique selected to demonstrate the infiltration of the writer's philosophy into his art. It helps in elucidating the serial crimes of Damon that were nurtured by his keen desire to replace the dead God and choose his own way of facing the absurdity of the world. It also proves that Wright promotes revolt and the freedom of choice as the only possible ways to end the absurdity of life, while he embraces the Godlessness of life to reveal the reincarnation of the self. On the other hand, the dialogic technique reinforces the assumption that Wright is influenced by the Sartrean-Camusian discourse. His adaptation of freedom of choice, criticism of the 'leap of faith', demonstration of the impacts of philosophical suicide on the life of Blacks, rejection of the meaning offered by religion, rebelling against reality, and embracing the Godlessness of life while chasing authenticity, all reveal the rebirth of a new self that helps in categorizing Wright with the leading figures of the field: Camus, Sartre even Nietzsche, Dostoevsky, De Beauvoir, and others. Whereas, the following part of the research intends to delve into the novels of McCarthy, seeking an answer to the questions: what does God signify for McCarthy? Do McCarthy and Wright have the same vision about the concept of God and the rebirth of the self?

II. “There’s No God, And We Are His Prophets”: Does Cormac McCarthy Kill God in His Fiction?

1. Cormac McCarthy Between Faith in God and Atheism

“American literature’s most lauded writers of the past years are obsessed with God. Their constant questioning of Him is even more curious in light of their personal atheism.”

-Steven A. Mirarchi.⁵⁶³

Critics preoccupied with the “God-haunted” literature of Cormac McCarthy settled on the fact that the continuous presence of the theme of spirituality or his attraction to God in fiction proves his engagement in the heated debate about the function of religion in contemporary social constructs, where the public mindset is becoming more secular. In other words, McCarthy’s literary tradition reveals his keen interest in questioning morality, existence, and violence alongside the human desire to create meaning and order for the senseless chaotic universe with regard to the centrality of the conflicting notion of God that most times are all brought together in the same work like in *The Road*, *No Country For Old Man* or even *Blood Meridian*. So, this thematic consistency, in his oeuvre, which is accompanied by a holistic depiction of the world where man is abandoned on earth and has the choice to create his own self and fight for existence, raises a debate about the silence of God among McCarthy’s scholars. This act of silencing God is perceived by some critics, like James Wood and Kirk Essary, as an intentional death of God on the part of McCarthy. Such an interpretation derives from Bell Vereen’s book-length study, *The Achievements of Cormac McCarthy*, where he claims that the latter’s works are

⁵⁶³ Steven A. Mirarchi, “Faith of the Unbelievers: Contemporary American Fiction Questions God,” PhD Diss., Brandeis University, 2002, 6.

woven between despair and nihilism due to the absence of God.⁵⁶⁴ The echoes of these views are later heard in McCarthy's declaration in a 2006 interview with Oprah Winfrey when asked whether he believed in God. He responds with laughter, saying, "That would depend on what day of the week you asked me. [...] Sometimes it's good to pray. I don't think you have to have a clear idea of who or what God is to pray. You could even be quite doubtful about the whole business."⁵⁶⁵ The resonance of these words uttered in such a tone has fatefully widened the scope of the controversy about the author's own religious leaning that his fiction intrinsically mirrors. Accordingly, the maturity sneaking in this field of research in recent years does not refute Vereen's reading of McCarthy, as it ascribes the novelist's literary production to the Atheist and Gnostic discourses. To name but a few, Patrick Damien O'Connor's *Anti-Matters: Mortal Ethics in Cormac McCarthy's The Road* (2017), J.C. Scharl's "*We Languish in Obscurity*": *The Silence of God as Atavistic Calvinism in Cormac McCarthy's Fiction* (2014) and Allen Josephs' *The Quest for God in The Road* (2013) have not denied the atheistic tone that characterizes McCarthy's oeuvre. Therefore, they substantiate Vereen's confession when he declares that "there can be no doubt that McCarthy is a genuine - if somehow secular – mystic"⁵⁶⁶ However, this never means the repudiation of the Catholic upbringing of McCarthy which is also projected in his novels; it is his intention to leave his religious commitment ambiguous in addition to his ambivalent nature about the whole issue which has led to a split in his scholarship. This is, in fact, what has led Steven A. Mirarchi to claim that McCarthy is the "one who knows how to quote scripture but refuses to be mastered by the institutions that have commandeered it."⁵⁶⁷

⁵⁶⁴Bell M. Vereen, *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy* (Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), 14.

⁵⁶⁵Cormac McCarthy, Oprah's Book Club, interview by Oprah Winfrey, Santa Fe Institute, January 14, 2012. <http://www.oprah.com>.

⁵⁶⁶Bell M. Vereen, "Between the Wish and the Thing, the World Lies Waiting," *Southern Review* 28, no. 4 (1992): 926.

⁵⁶⁷Mirarchi, "Faith of the Unbelievers, 6.

McCarthy's reservations about his religious inclinations as well as the ambiguity that characterizes his works and the few interviews he has given, give rise to a counter camp that advocates religiosity in his fiction. One of the main leading figures is Edwin T. Arnold, who is known for his loyalty to the Roman Catholic Church. This stream of criticism predominantly traces the religious signs in McCarthy's oeuvre, more precisely, the Tennessee novels. Arnold stands in opposition to the nihilism proposed by Bell Vereen, adding a moral dimension to McCarthy's *The Orchard Keeper*, *The Outer Dark*, *The Child of God*, *Suttree*, in addition to *The Border Trilogy*. The latter has strengthened Arnold's perception of McCarthy's novels as "moral parables" with a religious dimension. However, his work does not go beyond the limited boundaries of the literal meaning that the text seems to offer. To put it another way, he rarely goes into detail about the symbolism and the dual meaning of the images he analyzes, except for an insinuation that McCarthy "makes compelling use of western Christian symbology [...] his own belief system embraces a larger and more pantheistic view."⁵⁶⁸ In the same vein, the publication of *No Country for Old Men* and *The Road* encourages Manuel Broncano to build on Arnold's views in his study of the religious allegory in McCarthy's late works in an attempt to discover the extent to which McCarthy is connected or detached from the Judeo-Christian tradition. Though his innovative views succeeded, to a certain extent, in deciphering the McCarthian enigmatic susceptibility to religion, the ambiguity that overlaps this issue is beyond the scope of his interest.

On the other hand, the Gnostic discourse finds its way to the McCarthian scholarship by a third group of critics headed by Leo Daugherty. The latter suggests an innovative reading of

⁵⁶⁸Edwin T. Arnold, "Naming, Knowing, Nothingness: McCarthy's Moral Parables," in *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy*, ed. Edwin T. Arnold and Dianne C. Luce (Jackson: Mississippi University Press, 1999), 45-69 quoted in Petra Mundik, "Striking the Fire Out of the Rock": Gnostic Theology in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*," *South Central Review* 26, no. 3 (FALL 2009): 72.

McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* in an article entitled *Gravers False and True: Blood Meridian as Gnostic Tragedy*. Since the main theme of the novel is the conflict between good and evil which is pictured with a violent tone, Daugherty interprets it as one of the main aspects of Gnosticism in *Blood Meridian*. Accordingly, he claims that "most thoughtful people have looked at the world they lived in and asked, How did evil get into it?, The Gnostics have looked at the world and asked, How did good get into it?"⁵⁶⁹ and this is the core interest of Gnosticism at his sight. Moreover, he considers the enormity of the world portrayed by McCarthy in all his fiction, which is one way to question the nature of God Who is supposed to have created the universe, parallel to the Gnostic belief. Lately, many scholars like Petra Mundik in her *A Bloody and Barbarous Gods: The Metaphysics of Cormac McCarthy* and "Striking the Fire Out of the Rock": Gnostic Theology in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* adopted Daugherty's interpretation of the McCarthian perception of God.

A critical reading of the criticism in McCarthy's scholarship leads us to confess the ambivalent nature of the Pulitzer Prize-winning author. This ambivalence is the upshot of his inexplicable decision to adhere to silence when asked to comment on his works or beliefs. In view of that, the genesis of his unique blend of belief and unbelief, acceptance and rejection, is most times related to his morbid fascination with Herman Melville. Likewise, the Melvillean legacy reveals the ambivalent attitudes of America's most celebrated writer of all time, Melville, to Christianity. Stance that Nathaniel Hawthorne comments on claiming that Melville "can neither believe nor be comfortable in his unbelief, and he is too honest and courageous not to try

⁵⁶⁹Leo Daugherty, "The Gravers False and True: *Blood Meridian* as Gnostic Tragedy," in *Perspectives on Cormac McCarthy*, ed. Edwin T. Arnold and Dianne C. Luce (Jackson: Mississippi University Press, 1999), 162.

to do one or the other”⁵⁷⁰ In other words, Melville’s literary tradition shows not only his intellectual attraction to the Christian dogmas, but it also reinforces his personal precarious faith; a faith that oscillates between the possible death of God and the anguish generated by thinking about his feasible presence. Accordingly, works like *Moby-Dick* became a canonical text for many contemporary novelists, and Cormac McCarthy is among those who openly declared his admiration for the novel which he considers his favorite book of all time. Therefore, the Melvillean spirit haunts the McCarthian literary production to a point that compels critics to consider him a true precursor to McCarthy’s enigmatic narrative mode, humanism, and spirituality. This perception is what Harold Bloom alludes to in his *How to Read and Why* when he wonders, “Who is Melville’s God, or the God of those who came after him: Faulkner, West, Pynchon, Cormac McCarthy?”⁵⁷¹ In other words, McCarthy’s ambivalent nature derives from his influence by Melville, so the Melvillean God finds its echo in McCarthy’s works. The latter does not deny the fact that he has been influenced by some writers since he considers ‘literary influence’ unavoidable. This viewpoint comes to light from his dictum when he declares that “the ugly fact is that books are made out of books... the novel depends for its life on the novels that have been written before”⁵⁷² This perception of the novel as ‘a mosaic of quotations’ -to borrow Julia Kristeva’s expression- shapes the creation of twelve canonical novels, two plays, three short stories and five screenplays.

In *The Late Modernism of Cormac McCarthy*, David Holloway considers McCarthy a late modernist author whose primary interest is to distance himself from traditional Modernism. To put it another way, since he is among those who have witnessed the shift from Modernism to

⁵⁷⁰ Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Notebook Entry*, November 20 1856, quoted in Harry Levin, *The Power of Blackness: Hawthorne, Poe, Melville* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970), 224.

⁵⁷¹ Harold Bloom, *How to Read and Why* (New York: Scribner, 2000), 237.

⁵⁷² Richard B. Woodward, “McCarthy’s Venomous Fiction,” *New York Times Magazine*, April 19, 1992, 31

Postmodernism, his writings are devoid of all sorts of conventional thoughts that resist following the crowd. Accordingly, his reliance on postmodern techniques in crafting his texts is basically due to his deliberate intention to direct acute criticism to the tenets of the movement itself and a way to question the religiosity of the American subject.⁵⁷³ With such a critical vision in mind, McCarthy does not adopt but adapts the Melvillean legacy to fit with his philosophy. This leads us to suggest that Cormac McCarthy goes beyond the boundaries of Melville's thoughts. In other words, his imprecise religious stance defines his approach to religion or the issue of God because he aims to problematize what critics later term 'the silence of God' in fiction while leaving his personal beliefs away from what his fictional characters promote. Thus, he becomes the "prophet of destruction"⁵⁷⁴ since he aims to profane the Christian faith and kill God in the most tactical manner to, eventually, establish a kind of iconoclasm through fiction. Lately, regardless of all that has been previously stated concerning the presence of God in McCarthy's fiction, no one could assert whether he is an atheist, Gnostic, pantheist, or honest Catholic writer. However, what we can draw as a conclusion from our critical reading of his works and criticism is that Cormac McCarthy has negative attitudes about religion and God as a whole. Hence, the following section is constructed to exemplify and identify these negative attitudes in *Suttree* and then *The Road* through the analysis of the literary techniques used in the construction of the plot's events in order to argue for the death of God in the two novels and reveal the reincarnation of the new rebellious self.

⁵⁷³Holloway David, *The Late Modernism of Cormac McCarthy* (Westport, Greenwood Press, 2002), 4.

⁵⁷⁴ An expression borrowed from McCarthy's novel *No Country for Old Men* to elaborate on the writer's intention from the recurrent use of religious themes in his fiction.

2. Suttree and The Road: The Curse of God and the Rebirth of the Self Conceived Through Literary Techniques

The current part of the chapter is primarily devoted to the analysis of the major techniques Cormac McCarthy relies on in *Suttree* and *The Road* to argue for the death of God and the rebirth of the self in these works; a perspective that contributes to the originality of this research. Therefore, it opens with a critical reading of *Suttree* as an example of his Appalachian novels and then ends with an examination of *The Road* in an attempt to shed light on one of his Western texts.

2.1. Narrative Choices Announcing the Self as a Heir of God in *Suttree*

McCarthy's obsession with spirituality does not only seem to haunt his Appalachian works, but even the Western novels reveal a great deal with the theme. It is common among scholars that the masterpiece, *Suttree*, is known for its unique intermingling of the realist style in exposing the setting along with the epistolary mode, while the richness of the work is reinforced with the presence of the gothic and the absurd elements. In the process of analyzing the literary techniques in the selected novels of McCarthy, the examination of the narrative choices he makes may be ample proof to lay bare the author's intention to declare the rebirth of the rebellious self as a result of God's death in *Suttree*.

2.1.1. Multiple Viewpoints, One Void: The Narrative Voices in *Suttree*

Distinct choices in style have characterized the literary production of Cormac McCarthy since the publication of his first opus, *The Orchard Keeper*. Hence, these choices that he makes attest to his genuine mastery of the narrative skills which have, eventually, led John Cant to claim

that “no two novels of his [McCarthy] have the same form.”⁵⁷⁵ Though *Suttree* is written in the traditional Faulknerian fashion, which typifies the Southern novel, weighty philosophical concepts mingle with the maximalism of his narrative style. Moreover, no one doubts the fact that questioning the existence of God in man’s life is a recurrent theme in McCarthy’s oeuvre, but the markers that inkle his personal beliefs vary from one work to another, as the intention behind tackling the issue also differs. Therefore, analyzing the change in the narrative perspective is another technique through which we may approach the reincarnation of the self in the works of McCarthy.

Walter Sullivan once claimed that McCarthy “was done with God before he ever put pen to paper,”⁵⁷⁶ an assumption advocated throughout his oeuvre. In an attempt to discuss this issue from a different angle in his fourth novel, we hypothesize that the reliance on more than one limited narrative perspective is predominantly done on purpose by the author to direct a sharp criticism of traditional religion using fictional voices that vocalize his own convictions. In other words, *Suttree* demonstrates an incomparable merger of the first and the third-person narrative points of view which hardens for the reader the task to identify the perspective being used even within the same passage. Though the omniscient third-person narrator dominates the plot of the novel, the shift to the first-person is an invitation from McCarthy to enter into his character’s mind to have an insight into their perception of controversial matters such as the possible absence of God in life. Therefore, to come out with a clear vision of the nature of God for McCarthy in *Suttree* requires a careful examination of different excerpts from the narrative. The following example best illustrates our viewpoint

⁵⁷⁵John Cant, “The Road,” in *Cormac McCarthy and the Myth of American Exceptionalism* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 267.

⁵⁷⁶Walter Sullivan, “Southern Writers in Spiritual Exile,” In *Praise of Blood Sports and Other Essays* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 44.

This old bedroom in this old house where he'd been taught a sort of Christian witchcraft had two doors and Suttree rose and went out the other one. He descended the front steps and went to the fireplace where he lifted back the iron mask and on one knee reached up the chimney throat and took down a small billikin carved from some soft wood and detailed with a child's crayon. When he came past the stairway the priest was mounted on the first landing like a piece of statuary. A catatonic shaman who spoke no word at all. Suttree went out the way that he'd come in, crossing the grass toward the lights of the street. When he looked back he could see the shape of the priest in the bay window watching like a paper priest in a pulpit or a prophet sealed in glass.⁵⁷⁷

McCarthy's reliance on the third-person narration is primarily due to the intention to deliver controversial ideas with an objective tone to give a universal dimension to his perspective. Particularly, the choice of the descriptive style empowered with the use of the third-person pronoun 'He' succeeds in creating a gap between the reader and the character since the focus in the text is on the actions of the persona rather than his internal thoughts or emotions that evoke empathy. Hence, the use of the elusive phrase 'Christian witchcraft' to describe the religious teaching that Suttree once received implies a negative connotation of the Western belief system. In other words, McCarthy intends to draw attention to the view that Christianity is corrupted when he associates it with witchcraft that is based on superstitions. Therefore, religion which was once an outlet for man: his first reference where he seeks truth, has lost its spiritual weight and purity to no longer be able to offer answers because it is built on lies. This leads us to suggest that the rejection of religious teaching is a rejection of religion in itself, as it is one way to reveal cryptic thoughts about the possible death of God. Furthermore, we should not forget that the novel is a semiautobiographical work and both Suttree and McCarthy have a Catholic upbringing, so doubting the old faith of the protagonist bears a certain disregard for God in the heart of McCarthy which is externalized through the omniscient third-person narrator. This interpretation may be valid when we continue reading the quote to stop at the reference to the "billikin" which

⁵⁷⁷ Cormac McCarthy, *Suttree* (New York: Random House, 1992), 376.

was detailed with the crayon of a child, symbolizing the trivialization of Christian symbols. Additionally, another important symbol that is negatively represented is the priest. The metaphorical image drawn of the priest portrays him as a ‘statuary’ and a ‘shaman’ who dwells in the dark old school. The objectification of such an important religious figure signifies his powerlessness, while his loss of spiritual authority is alluded to when he is first disregarded by Suttree and then shown as a ‘paper priest’ or ‘prophet sealed in glass’⁵⁷⁸. The narrator, eventually, succeeds in capturing the retrogression of Suttree’s faith objectively because instead of evoking the reader’s sympathy for the persona, he is provided with judgments and viewpoints to be accepted or considered at least.

There are many instances in the narrative where the writer relies on the same technique. To mention but a few, in the scene where Suttree appears in the Church of the Immaculate Conception, McCarthy makes use of the omniscient third-person narrator to reveal the character’s inner thoughts while watching a baptism. The diction used by the narrator is loaded with negativity as when he considers the church as a “kingdom of fear and ashes.”⁵⁷⁹ It is a place he regrets having attended in his youth, as he believes that he used to be a “Spurious acolyte, dreamer impenitent.”⁵⁸⁰ To bear the presence in such a “sad chapel.”⁵⁸¹ Hence, the negative representation of the house of God proves McCarthy’s negative attitudes toward religion or God in a broader sense.

All in all, the omniscient third-person narrator is the voice of McCarthy in the work since such a narrative technique grants him the space where he can freely intervene but with an objective tone to expose his beliefs. Therefore, the choice to rely on the omniscient third-person

⁵⁷⁸ McCarthy, *Suttree*, 376.

⁵⁷⁹ McCarthy, *Suttree*, 314.

⁵⁸⁰ McCarthy, *Suttree*, 314.

⁵⁸¹ McCarthy, *Suttree*, 314.

narrator rather than the first-person narration when discussing the sacredness of organized religions is primarily due to his intention to give his views a universal dimension, taking advantage of the aspect of generalization that this narrative choice offers.

The uniqueness of the narrative style of McCarthy in *Suttree* is perceptible in the blend of two different narrative perspectives. Therefore, the writer sometimes shifts to the first-person narration in order to “heighten(s) readers’ experiences of the text, shortening or erasing altogether the gap between narrator and event and, consequently, between reader and event [...] distance imposed by removed narration.”⁵⁸² In other words, the decision to integrate the first-person point of view into the work is mainly due to the novelist’s intention to keep the reader attached to the narrative by granting him the chance to live with the character the different emotional turmoil he experiences more fully rather than “coldly observing without any emotional attachment to the actions.”⁵⁸³ One of the strongest passages in the novel, where all these ideas echo, is when Suttree says

One thing. I spoke with bitterness about my life and I said that I would take my own part against the slander of oblivion and against the monstrous facelessness of it and that I would stand a stone in the very void where all would read my name. Of that vanity I recant all.⁵⁸⁴

The narrative choice relied on creating the so-called confessional tone from the part of the protagonist gives access to the reader to enter into Suttree’s inner mind. This confession generates a kind of intimacy between the speaker and the receiver due to the exchangeability of the emotional experience. So, Suttree confesses the futility of his attempts to assert his self

⁵⁸²Lydia R. Cooper, “Cormac McCarthy’s Heroes: Narrative Perspective and Morality in McCarthy’s Novels,” PhD diss., Baylor University, 2008, 175.

⁵⁸³Cooper, “Cormac McCarthy’s Heroes,” 175.

⁵⁸⁴McCarthy, *Suttree*, 512.

against what he terms “the slanders of oblivion and against the monstrous facelessness of it”⁵⁸⁵. In other words, the struggle to avow oneself and seek meaning in one's existence while being abandoned to an absurd world used to be a priority for Suttree. So, the oblivion and its facelessness here allude to the absurdity of the universe that was rejected by the character in the early years of his life. As a result, the awareness of this reality makes him lost in an everlasting void. This void, in fact, is a metaphorical representation of the existential emptiness that man experiences due to his realization of the absence of God in the world. To put it another way, the death of God in man's heart and life leads him to be haunted by such feelings. On the other hand, the last sentence of the quote, “Of that vanity I recant all,”⁵⁸⁶ reveals the rejection of his old beliefs since he becomes aware that fighting the absurd by rejecting it is futile, since it “dies only when we,”⁵⁸⁷ learn how to accept it as suggested by Camus. So, the first step to gain the battle against the absurd is to accept it and understand that man's abandonment in the universe is a reality that has to be admitted and then one can move to create his self and try to seek “meaning out of one's contingent selfhood,”⁵⁸⁸ since God- Who normally is the source of meaning- is dead. Thus, Suttree “has the fortitude to reject what Karl Marx termed ‘the opium of the people.’”⁵⁸⁹ Therefore, the choice to declare these ideas relying on the First-person narrative point of view primarily aims to establish an emotional tie between the reader and Suttree which is significant since it creates from the character's self-awareness of his existential crisis an epiphany for the reader who is stimulated by the words he receives to reassess his own inner troubles. In other words, the writer's shift to the first-person narrative perspective is made on purpose to make “the

⁵⁸⁵ McCarthy, *Suttree*, 512.

⁵⁸⁶ McCarthy, *Suttree*, 512.

⁵⁸⁷ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 18.

⁵⁸⁸ Jay Aaron Beavers, “Stairwell to nowhere”: The Darkness of God in Cormac McCarthy's *Suttree*,” *South Atlantic Review* 80, no. 1-2 (2015): 101.

⁵⁸⁹ Karl Marx, “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*: Introduction,” in *The Marx-Engels Reade*, Ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978), 54.

revelations of interiority”⁵⁹⁰ reciprocal. In the same vein, Lydia Cooper when commenting on McCarthy’s narrative perspective illustrates the writer’s intention to involve the reader in his work referring to Kuno’s concept of literary empathy which “is based on the assumption that a reader automatically attempts to identify him or herself with the speaker of a text or, in the absence of a clearly identified speaker, with the character whose point of view controls the narrative of a text.”⁵⁹¹ Hence, the use of the first-person narration facilitates the task for the reader and brings him closer to the events of the narrative.

One of the most important details that should never be skipped when dealing with the narrative choices in McCarthy’s novel is the fusion of the two narrative perspectives without the presence of any linguistic clues. To put it another way, the writer sometimes includes “situations where the text seems relatively external, however, there are still occasions where the text reveals a particular character’s *perceptions* without explicitly describing the character’s thought processes.”⁵⁹² [Italics original]. This variety in the narrative perspective allows McCarthy to expose his philosophy artistically.

All in all, the examination of the diversity in the narrative point of view in *Suttree* leads us to confirm the hypothesis suggested in the opening of the current section. The reliance on more than one limited narrative perspective is one way used by McCarthy to reveal his negative attitudes toward organized religions and his disregard for God in a broader sense. This technique grants him a wider influence on the reader, whom he aims to welcome his viewpoint, because his work concerns and brings to question the inner troubles of the sick self that seeks rebirth and freedom even in fiction. The dialogic structure is another choice taken by McCarthy through

⁵⁹⁰Cooper, “Cormac McCarthy’s Heroes,” 8.

⁵⁹¹Cooper, “Cormac McCarthy’s Heroes,” 19.

⁵⁹²Cooper, “Cormac McCarthy’s Heroes,” 18.

which this matter is extensively discussed. Thus, it is the concern of the following section to deeply analyze these ideas.

2.1.2. Solitary Voice Annihilating the Shadow of God in Dialogues

The issue of the possible death of God in man's life is a controversial topic in the structured dialogues of McCarthy's *Suttree*. Since these dialogues are known for their subjective tone, the voice of the writer, loaded with his own beliefs, can always be heard and identified in the words of his fictional personas. So, analyzing the dialogic structure in the novel is significant in constructing an accurate image of McCarthy's philosophy.

The conversation between characters is the terrain where the writer can expose different philosophical concepts and disclose his perception of controversial issues through his fictional characters while ostensibly being an outsider to the narrative. In *Suttree*, McCarthy chooses different characters to reveal to the reader his stance on the concept of God. In one of the scenes, Suttree converses with Leonard while helping the latter to get rid of his dead father's body. The protagonist, who has a Catholic upbringing, ignores Leonard's request to say the psalm starting from "that part that goes through the shadow of the valley of death,"⁵⁹³ choosing to throw the dead man to the river in silence. This act of rejection of the Christian rituals in death is a rejection of religion itself. So, his disregard for the demands of his friend reveals his negative attitude toward organized religions and strengthens the supposition that he curses God within his self. This is what justifies Bell Vereen's reference to the character as a "lapsed Catholic."⁵⁹⁴ He is the character who has the right to describe his thoughts with Camus's statement, "The perception of

⁵⁹³ McCarthy, *Suttree*, 313.

⁵⁹⁴ Bell M. Vereen, *The Achievement of Cormac McCarthy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1988), 69.

an angel or God has no meaning for me,”⁵⁹⁵ because it perfectly expresses his stance and elucidates his attitudes toward the concept as a whole.

The dialogue between the ragman and Suttree is another example where McCarthy delves deeper into mystical issues like the afterlife and the belief in God. It is the scene where we meet a nihilist voice which reminds us of the mother’s words from *The Road*. The following is a part of their conversation to elaborate on the ideas they present

I’ve seen all I want to see and I know all I want to know. I just look forward to death.
 He might hear you, Suttree said.
 I wisht he would, said the ragpicker. [...]
 No one wants to die.
 Shit, said the ragpicker. Here’s one that’s sick of livin.
 Would you give all you own?
 [...] It wont be long, he said. An old man’s days are hours.
 And what happens then?
 When?
 After you’re dead.
 Don’t nothin happen. You’re dead.
 You told me once you believed in God.
 The old man waved his hand. Maybe, he said. I got no reason to think he believes in me.⁵⁹⁶

The ragman’s words reveal his disillusionment with life that, eventually, generates a nihilist perception of the world. His declaration of the absence of any inherent meaning to life is what pushes him to say that he is ‘sick of livin’ and aspires to death. These feelings can be best interpreted as the state of being “remote from one’s own life,”⁵⁹⁷ as suggested by Albert Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Therefore, the ragman believes that only death can draw an end to his inner turmoil and grant his sick self solace. Similarly, McCarthy goes a step further to discuss the link between the afterlife and the belief in God by making Suttree a skeptical interlocutor whose

⁵⁹⁵ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 30.

⁵⁹⁶ McCarthy, *Suttree*, 320.

⁵⁹⁷ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 38.

role is to create more space for the ragman to express his thoughts. This mission is realized through the types of questions or statements he states which are devoid of any opposition or challenging tone to the ragman's view. So, Suttree's short and direct sentences like 'He might hear you' 'No one wants to die.' 'And what happens then?[...] After you're dead,'⁵⁹⁸ primarily seeks to come out with more clarification and explanation of different issues from the ragman's perspective. Going back to our main idea stated above, since the belief in God is one of the topics opened by the two characters, the old man's dismissal of the existence of what the Christians call the afterlife through the direct, simple sentence: 'Don't nothin happen. You're dead' is an expression of the author's belief that "What comes after death is futile,"⁵⁹⁹ a motto of every existential and absurdist scholar. In other words, the refutation of the afterlife is strong enough to argue for McCarthy's declaration of the death of God. While the answer of the ragman to Suttree's question about his old belief in God is another piece of evidence that strengthens the view that McCarthy's fiction is an expression of his intention to profane God and promote the rebirth of the self. In other words, the representation of his character as a lapsed old man who rejects escapism to the mystic realm to seek meaning, since this *leap of faith*, or what is termed by Camus a "philosophical suicide,"⁶⁰⁰ announces the denial of reason over the metaphysical meaning that religion offers. He is the one Steven Frye believes to be "endowed with an oblique wisdom and repose that allows him to ponder the mysteries of the universe"⁶⁰¹ to, eventually, suggest for us that his realization of the abandonment of man in an absurd universe leads him to curse God and declare His death within the relics of the shattered self. These feelings have driven the ragman to the threshold of nihilism.

⁵⁹⁸ McCarthy, *Suttree*, 320.

⁵⁹⁹ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 46.

⁶⁰⁰ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 28.

⁶⁰¹ Steven Frye, *Understanding Cormac McCarthy* (University of South Carolina Press: South Carolina, 2011), 61.

The absence of divine power in life is also alluded to in the death scene of the ragman through an imaginative conversation when Suttree wonders whether his dead friend has asked “About the crapgame? [...] There’s no one to ask is there? There’s no ...”⁶⁰² The word ‘crapgame’ refers to the absurdity of human existence which makes the ragman ponder about its essence and makes him seek an explanation from its creator in the other world, if He exists and would have the chance to meet Him. Therefore, Suttree appears in the world of the living to answer the unanswerable question that the ragman raised earlier, announcing to us that “there’s no ...”⁶⁰³ God rejecting “the comforts offered by religion’s promise of afterlife.”⁶⁰⁴ The use of the ellipsis here alludes to God. To put it another way, McCarthy has replaced the word ‘God’ with the ellipsis to stimulate the reader to draw his own conclusion that echoes the one his character has come to. Hence, through Suttree’s monologue, McCarthy declares the death of God and demonstrates that man is thrown into a senseless world where he has to create his self at first and then embrace the absurdity of his existence while rebelling against nihilistic despair by making a project in life; to choose his path.

Since the nature of God in the novel is better revealed in dialogues, the conversation between the main character and the priest is of higher importance to this part of the study. McCarthy inserts a scene where Suttree falls asleep in a church while “The priest gave a little smile, lightly touched with censure, remonstrance gentled. God’s house is not exactly the place to take a nap, he said. It’s not God’s house [Suttree]. I beg your pardon? [Priest] It’s not God’s house [Suttree]. Oh? [priest]”⁶⁰⁵ The dialogic structure serves as a vehicle for the revelation of the writer’s skepticism toward the holiness of the religious institutions that extend to include its

⁶⁰² McCarthy, *Suttree*, 521.

⁶⁰³ McCarthy, *Suttree*, 521.

⁶⁰⁴ William Christopher Spencer, “The Extremities of Cormac McCarthy: The Major Character Types,” PhD Diss., The University of Tennessee, 1993, 148.

⁶⁰⁵ McCarthy, *Suttree*, 319.

symbolism as well. In other words, the response of Suttree is a challenge to the priest's proclamation that the church is the house of God. This challenge is made evident through Suttree's double denial or the repetition of negation to the declarative statement of the priest. Accordingly, the disclosure of the challenging tone in a dialogic form with a minimal and simple style is significant to make such philosophical concepts closer to personal interaction. So, repetition of the same sentence with the same word order also expresses the character's certainty with emphasis on the idea being transmitted. This leads us to suggest that if he believes that the church is nothing more than any other man-made building without any divine significance, the existence of God Himself is denied. This suggests that McCarthy's subversion of the religious symbols is not only a refutation of God's status in human life but also a stimulus to the reader to reconsider all the issues being discussed in the conversation with a subjective tone, including his faith. Moreover, if we go back to the quote for the second reading, we can identify the difference between the tone of the priest and that of Suttree, which aligns with our stream of thought. On the one hand, McCarthy chooses to put the main character in a compelling position by attributing to him an assertive tone that externalizes his inner thoughts with confidence. On the other hand, the priest who stands for Christian theology appears in a weaker status because of his hesitation when he responds to Suttree's assertive words, saying 'I beg your pardon?'⁶⁰⁶. Such a response shows his uneasiness, which suggests that he is ill-equipped for such confrontations. In addition to the amazement revealed through his last utterance, 'Oh?', that expresses the fragile stance of the representative of God on earth. Hence, McCarthy's narrative choice that has portrayed the churchman in such a weak position in addition to the subversion of the religious symbols through Suttree's words, expresses his skepticism toward religion and doubt about the presence of divine

⁶⁰⁶ McCarthy, *Suttree*, 319.

power in the world that turns the scales in the favor of self which is reborn to be the master and the creator of laws and meaning.

In conclusion, the dialogic narrative structure is one of the techniques employed by McCarthy that reveals his rejection of Western theology. His characterization of the ragman and Suttree is a “recognition of the existence of the absurd”⁶⁰⁷ to which his characters choose “not to leap- not into Tennessee river, not into nihilist despair, not into organized religion”⁶⁰⁸ but they decide to embrace the absurdity of their existence and continue living since “those who live not for life itself but for some great idea that will transcend it, refine it, give it a meaning, and betray it”⁶⁰⁹ as Camus suggests. However, the priest- Suttree’s dialogue leaves a negative impression about the representative of God on earth, which, eventually, calls the reader to reconsider his faith. Lastly, *Suttree* strengthens the assumption that McCarthy is ‘the prophet of destruction’ whose fiction has broken the rigidity of silence that he has adhered to when asked about his religious beliefs or when invited to comment on his oeuvre. This perception is also reinforced by the lack of resolution of the narrative that endorses these assumptions.

2.1.3. The Unresolved End Echoing the Collapse of the Divine

Since the novel as a genre is a recreation or a rearrangement of reality by means of different literary techniques employed by a novelist, the angle from which this reality is perceived is what constitutes the uniqueness of every work of art. In other words, the philosophical leaning of the writer cannot be detached from his artistic production because it is

⁶⁰⁷William N. Prather, “An Existentialist Reading of the Novels of Cormac McCarthy,” phd Diss., University of Georgia, 2001, 92.

⁶⁰⁸Prather, “An Existentialist Reading of the Novels of Cormac McCarthy,” 92.

⁶⁰⁹Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 6.

literature that grants him the space to expose his ideas to the Other. In this regard, in a review of Sartre's *La Nausée*, Albert Camus once wrote that "a novel is never anything but a philosophy put into images."⁶¹⁰ In other words, literary works offer an alternative mode of exposing philosophical notions in an artistic as well as realistic way. Since chaos, disorder, the absurd, and unresolvedness are the main characteristics of our reality, McCarthy's *Suttree* pictures these elements through unconventional narrative techniques that leave this reality closer to the readers. The lack of resolution is a choice taken by the writer in order to authentically represent man's absurd existence in a Godless universe.

The wounds of a dual self have not only alienated Cornelius Suttree from the world but also driven him to a direct confrontation with the absurd. McCarthy's dramatization of his character's journey of self-identity does not only end up achieving the unity of the self, but it also opens Suttree's sight to other mystical issues that make him lost in a vicious circle. In this regard, existentialists find life chaotic and may end without any resolution because it is devoid of the divine power that offers man inner peace. Such ideas find their echoes in *Suttree* since the novel resists the traditional narrative structure that evolves from a climax to a clear resolution. In other words, McCarthy chooses to leave the end of his work ambiguous in order to maintain the established relationship between the reader, the characters, and the text itself. Hence, the lack of resolution always keeps the reader as an active participant, even if the reading process is over, because he is stimulated to think about a possible end to the story he is about to put aside. Hence, the reassessment of the events of the plot by the end of the reading process functions as a stimulus that activates the reader's imagination to suggest the appropriate resolution by visualizing himself in the state of the protagonist of the text at hand. This visualization paves the

⁶¹⁰ Albert Camus, "Review of *La Nausée* by Jean-Paul Sartre," in *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, trans. ed. Philip Thody (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1967), 145.

way for the reader to adopt the character's philosophical perception of the world. Hence, this leads us to claim that the primary intention of McCarthy from the choice of such a technique was to make the reader accept his idea, the representation of Suttree as a lapsed Catholic who curses God and then embraces the absurdity of his life due to the awareness that "it will be lived all the better if it has no meaning. Living an experience, a particular fate, is accepting it fully."⁶¹¹

Therefore, when Suttree grasps the findings he came to, the departure from Knoxville after his recovery from typhoid fever becomes inevitable. This means that his realization of the discrepancy between the old Catholic teachings and the truth he uncovers throughout his journey is resolved in the last scene, where he appears hitchhiking out of his hometown with a "small cardboard suitcase"⁶¹² in the most elegant clothes that symbolize the new beginning he is seeking. This departure is interpreted by William Prather as a result of his rejection of the allure of death and his choice of perpetual metaphysical defiance; he has gained the absurd telos-divine availability of freedom coupled with an intensity for living."⁶¹³ Hence, all these ideas and others can be traced in the novel's last passage where McCarthy states, "Somewhere in the gray wood by the river is the huntsman and in the brooming corn and in the castellated press of cities. His work lies all wheres, and his hounds tire not. I have seen them in a dream, slaverous and wild and their eyes crazed with ravening for souls in this world. Fly them."⁶¹⁴ The huntsman here is a symbol of death that roams everywhere chasing its victims. And this is what McCarthy means by 'his work lies all wheres' while the hounds may be interpreted as death's agents, or they can refer to human fate. So, these agents who are tireless in their mission stand for what Sartre terms *facticity*, meaning the inevitability of death and man's inability to change his fate. However, the

⁶¹¹ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 35.

⁶¹² McCarthy, *Suttree*, 584.

⁶¹³ William Nesbitt Prather, "An Existentialist Reading of the Novels of Cormac McCarthy," 100.

⁶¹⁴ McCarthy, *Suttree*, 586.

shift to the first-person narrator to reveal Suttree's perception of death is significant since it is a synthesis of all the suffering he endures and the mystical knowledge he acquires in the last few years. Accordingly, the protagonist's existential anxiety is revealed in dreams through the imagery used to visualize the fear of death. Words like 'slaverous', 'wild', and the phrase 'eyes crazed with ravening' better epitomize the feelings of Suttree and his recognition of the factuality of death. However, the last imperative echoes Camus' definition of the absurd. To put it another way, McCarthy alludes to the desire to escape the inescapable; the tension between the recognition of the senselessness of life and the human desire to resist that meaninglessness, though he is aware of the futility of such a struggle. Suttree, who is conscious of the absurdity of life and the inevitability of death, chooses to rebel; to compensate for the existential void left as a result of the death of God by granting his self the chance to dominate; to recreate his new path. However, McCarthy does not reveal how the character intends to realize his ideas and where he plans to go after his departure from Knoxville.

Eventually, the decision to leave the end of his work ambiguous, as stated above, is to impel the reader to share with his characters the same existential crises. Instead of a readymade resolution suggested by the writer of the work, the reader is required to find out his own resolution in accordance with the experience he witnessed in fiction that applies to his reality. *The Road* comes to reinforce this philosophical stance, as demonstrated in the next section.

2.2. Silencing Divinity: Techniques Reflecting the Death of God in The Road

The reputation that Cormac McCarthy has reaped in the last decade secures him a prestigious place among the best contemporary American fiction writers. This weighty position is gained due to his distinct prose style, known as being richly allusive to aptly fit his

unconventional plots, themes, and philosophical ideas. From the publication of his first novel, *The Orchard Keeper* (1965), to his last opus *Stella Maris* (2022), McCarthy's narrative style has been at the core interest of many critics, reviewers, and artists who designate him as "a legitimate heir to the Folknerian"⁶¹⁵ maximalism and Hemingwayesque minimalism. Due to the magnitude of his opus varying between the Appalachian and the Western, McCarthy is labeled a "working register of common idioms."⁶¹⁶ His reliance on diverse techniques, so to speak, insinuates his philosophical perception of some controversial concepts, such as the death of God in the life of the contemporary man. Hence, the present section aims to further elaborate on this issue by analyzing some literary techniques present in one of McCarthy's Western works, *The Road*.

2.2.1. Symbolism in *The Road*

2.2.1.1. The Symbolism of the Novel's Title

The first reading experience of any of McCarthy's novels undoubtedly leaves the impression that what is at hand is a work that rivals those canonical texts of literary history. *The Road*'s lyrical, symbolic style elicits the reader's imaginative understanding and challenges his linguistic and literary background to decipher the meaning incorporated in a minimal arrangement of words. Accordingly, symbolism is one of the main techniques that characterizes not only the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel but also all of his oeuvre. Therefore, Cormac McCarthy incorporates his symbolic language with religious connotations that might be considered a shred of evidence to open a debate on his religiosity. Thus, the title of the novel is the first thing that stops any scholar who attempts to study the symbols present in the narrative.

⁶¹⁵ Steven Frye, "Histories, Novels, Ideas: Cormac McCarthy and the Art of Philosophy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Cormac McCarthy*, ed. by Steven Frye (Bakersfield: California State University, 2013), 3.

⁶¹⁶ Kenneth Lincoln, *Cormac McCarthy: American Canticles* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 26.

Initially, before going into details, what needs to be highlighted is that McCarthy did not entitle his work with its current title, but it was put under a different one. Lydia Cooper in *Cormac McCarthy's The Road as Post-apocalyptic Grail Narrative* claims that *The Grail* was first selected as a title for the early draft McCarthy produced, but with the release of the final version several changes have been introduced to the text, including its title. But the real reason behind this is buried in the grave with McCarthy, regardless of all that has been alleged by some critics.

The first glance at the novel's title makes us expect a travel through a road or a journey. But the opening scene of the work makes the reader realize that the journey he is about to enter is quite different because of the feelings of discomfort and uneasiness aroused by the dark cold woods where nights are "dark beyond darkness"⁶¹⁷ in addition to the days that are lightless. So, the bleak atmosphere suggests the absence of the signs of life. In other words, the negative image constructed about the setting implies the lack of hope for a better future in the world where the journey takes place because it is devastated to the ground. Accordingly, on the second page, McCarthy mentions the term "road" -for the first time- where the protagonist studies the surrounding environment to conclude that it is "Barren, silent, godless."⁶¹⁸ These three words illustrate what is previously mentioned about the setting which is bleak, lifeless, and godless. Moreover, since the 'road' is the place where characters spend most of their time as it is the way to reach their destination; it is ascribed with negative connotations. To further illustrate this point, McCarthy associates it with darkness and danger as demonstrated in the following excerpts

The road was black.

This was not a safe place. They could be seen from the road now it was day.

⁶¹⁷ Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 3.

⁶¹⁸ McCarthy, *The Road*, 4.

Then he heard on the road behind them what sounded like a diesel truck. Quick, he whispered. Quick. He shoved the pistol in his belt and grabbed the boy by the hand and he dragged the cart through the trees and tilted it over where it would not so easily be seen. The boy was frozen with fear.⁶¹⁹

Though ‘the road’ stands for the journey southward, the diction used indicates that it is never safe for the travelers because it is the way taken by cannibals, scavengers, thieves, and ethical survivors, or what McCarthy refers to as the ‘good guys’. So, ‘the road’ for these good guys is a source of fear and darkness; a place where safety is chased elsewhere. This is what justifies the characters’ escape when they realize that they may be seen by other road travelers. Hence, words like “quick”, “whispered”, “shove”, “grabbed”, “pistol”, and “fear” reveal the amount of terror haunting the man and his little boy. Moreover, there are other scenes where ‘the road’ is associated with death, like when the narrator says “by day the dead impaled on spikes along the road [...] In the road, nothing living anywhere.”⁶²⁰ Therefore, death is the nightmare that terrifies the few remaining survivors. Accordingly, this constructed image of the road leads us to suggest that man is thrown and abandoned in a wasteland where no sign of God’s presence is identified. In other words, the road symbolizes the death of God, who has withdrawn, leaving man alone to struggle against a decaying world for survival because “on this road there are no godspoke men. They are gone and I am left and they have taken with them the world.”⁶²¹ This declaration by McCarthy reinforces our perception of the symbolism of the novel’s title. To put it another way, he openly states that the road is devoid of the messengers of God or no more prophets are alive in such a post-apocalyptic world, whose absence equates to the absence of God on earth. Additionally, the expression “I am left” indicates McCarthy’s adoption of the belief in the abandonment of man in the universe which Sartre advocates. In a similar vein, such an insight

⁶¹⁹ McCarthy, *The Road*, 31-5-52.

⁶²⁰ McCarthy, *The Road*, 28-25.

⁶²¹ McCarthy, *The Road*, 27.

obliges us to refer to the Christian perception of ‘the road’ or ‘the path’ which is generally aligned with the faith in God that guides people to “the path of justice or the path of life”⁶²² that entirely grants them a wave of inner peace and creates meaning to their struggle for survival. However, Cormac McCarthy wholly opposes this stream of thought which suggests that he aims to deconstruct the Christian symbolism. Eventually, we come to conclude that McCarthy intends to throw his characters into such a Godless setting through which he would be able to play the role of ‘the prophet of destruction’ of the sacred symbols in order to introduce the self as the substitute of God on earth. This process of deconstruction is emphasized through other symbols, like the journey to the south.

2.2.1.2. The Journey to the South

McCarthy’s tenth novel follows the journey of an unnamed father and his ten-year-old boy to the South in quest of more tolerable weather and an endurable environment. This trip to the South is not only physical, but it symbolizes an inner journey for the man since he has witnessed an inner transformation and awareness about his faith in God. Initially, the chaos that defines the fictional universe of McCarthy makes the protagonist lost among the ruins and the ash that enfolds everything around him. To question the existence of God seems unavoidable in such a devastated world. The father’s observation of the natural world that surrounds him and his little boy at the beginning of their journey makes him suffer from an inner shattering due to his ambivalent spirituality created as a result of the paradox between the external environment and the possible presence of God. In one of the early scenes of the novel, the man “raised his face to the paling day. Are you there? He whispered. Will I see you at the last? Have you a neck by

⁶²²Eric Pudney, “Christianity and Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*,” *English Studies* 96, no. 3 (2015): 298, doi: 10.1080/0013838X.2014.996383.

which to throttle you? Have you a heart? Damn you eternally have you a soul? Oh God, he whispered. Oh God.”⁶²³ These words leave no chance for doubt about the writer’s intention to curse God and declare His death through the protagonist’s utterances. The father doubts the very divinity of God to whom he raises his face to directly address him in an act of reification. The character does not only question the existence of God, but words like “throttle”, “soul”, and “neck” indicate his desire to kill God. This declaration echoes Nietzsche’s famous passage from *The Gay Science* when the madman says, “I’m looking for God! I’m looking God! [...] ‘Where is God?’ he cried. ‘I’ll tell you! *We have killed him-* I and you!”⁶²⁴ [Italics original]

This inner turmoil becomes evident as they proceed in their journey, especially when they confront the bare truth of severe hunger, heavy rain, and the cold which leads the man to confess the grim reality where everything has vanished and faded away, even “the names of things slowly following those things into oblivion. [...] the sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so of its reality.”⁶²⁵ The man’s inner thought is interpreted by Allen Josephs as proof to argue for McCarthy’s atheistic leaning. He assumes that to “subtract the idiom and you subtract the referent- the un-reification of God.”⁶²⁶ To put it another way, the post-cataclysmic world witnesses the loss of all its parameters; the material objects are followed by the desertion of their signifiers. It is even widened to include sacred idioms that have lost their meaning and value in a Godless post-apocalyptic environment. In other words, in his meditation, the man realizes that the signs of the decay of religious morals and ethics are a direct consequence of a lost faith in God. Hence, the senseless idioms equal the death of God at the man’s sight. Hence, the initial desire to

⁶²³ McCarthy, *The Road*, 10.

⁶²⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Trans. by Josefine Nauckhoff, Ed. by Bernard Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 119-120.

⁶²⁵ McCarthy, *The Road*, 75.

⁶²⁶ Josephs Allen, “The Quest for God in *The Road*,” in in *The Cambridge Companion to Cormac McCarthy*, ed. by Steven Frye (Bakersfield: California State University, 2013), 143.

kill God drives him to lose faith in God's teaching which, eventually, announces the birth of the new atheist self of the post-cataclysm. Therefore, the physical trip to the South symbolizes an inner journey that results in the birth of a new self due to the awareness of the absence of God in such a dystopian world.

To continue living and traveling, the father needs to find an alternative to God in his life so that his struggle would have meaning and nihilism would not sneak into his mind. Thus, the curse of God requires the creation of a project or a purpose in life. In *The Road*, McCarthy pictures this concept through the intimate relationship between the father and his son. In other words, the father's attempt to fill the void in his life drives him to believe that he is on a holy mission with an unusual boy, a messiah. Accordingly, the writer shows that the character has chosen to start this holy mission with the messiah-like boy and is able to draw his path in accordance with his own beliefs because "he knew only that the child was his *warrant*. [...] So, he whispered to the sleeping boy. *I have you*. [...] A person who had *no one* would be well advised to cobble together some passable *ghost*. *Breathe* it into *being* and coax it along with words of *love*."⁶²⁷ [Emphasis added]. The diction used demonstrates that the man continues the struggle for existence for the sake of the child because he is seen as a "warrant" which justifies the father's declaration, "I have you." Similarly, the last excerpt reinforces this perception when the dead mother tells the man that the struggle for existence requires a motive, even if it is a mere illusion within oneself. Later, the protagonist follows his wife's advice when he sits wondering, "Where you've nothing else construct ceremonies out of the air and breathe upon them."⁶²⁸ The term "ceremonies" here evokes the "ghost" the mother talks about in the previous quote. Therefore, the created illusion fills the void left by the death of God in the man's life. Hence, this

⁶²⁷ McCarthy, *The Road*, 4- 46- 49.

⁶²⁸ McCarthy, *The Road*, 63.

is what justifies the father's declaration to the boy that his "job is to take care of [him]. I was appointed to do that by God. I will kill anyone who touches you. Do you understand?"⁶²⁹ The reference to God here does not suggest any religious connotation, but it merely reveals the father's created illusion. In other words, he believes and attempts to convince his boy that the journey to the South symbolizes a holy mission that constitutes the essence of the man's existence.

In conclusion, the man's Southward trip does not only divulge the character's physical suffering and revolt against the external environment for survival, but it also symbolizes an inner journey to the self. The post-apocalyptic reality kills all signs of the presence of God in the material world as well as in the man's self. So, the death of God symbolizes the rebirth of the self that rebels and challenges the decaying universe by creating a purpose for its existence that makes its struggle seem meaningful without the need for God's providence. This insight is best illustrated through the character named Ely.

2.2.1.3. Ely: God's Assassin.

Ely is *The Road*'s most controversial character, though he occupies very few pages of the work. The controversy he creates through his paradoxical words adds fuel to the fire about McCarthy's religiosity. Moreover, Ely proves the view of those who consider McCarthy 'the prophet of destruction' of Christian symbolism and imagery. The episode where the two main characters encounter this old beggar has been differently interpreted, but no one denies McCarthy's atheistic tone. In this regard, Erick J. Wielenburg believes that the few remaining survivors in McCarthy's fictional universe are mere "prophets of atheism, bearing witness to the

⁶²⁹ McCarthy, *The Road*, 65.

absence of God from the universe.”⁶³⁰ This proclamation includes the only named persona because he is the one who openly declares that “there is no God and we are his prophets.”⁶³¹ This statement reveals his atheism which echoes the father’s early declaration: “On this road, there are no godspoke men”⁶³². Therefore, through Ely McCarthy maintains that God is removed within us, and this removal extends to include the religious morals that used to shape interpersonal relations. And this is what justifies his portrayal of human life as a battle for survival governed by the jungle rule. While the second part of Ely’s statement may seem paradoxical because one may ask the question: if God is dead, then what is the role of the prophets of a dead God? This is a legitimate inquiry. To answer such a question, we need to understand one thing: the announcement of Ely that God never spoke suggests that the “prophets” he refers to are the murderers of God. In other words, McCarthy tends to purposefully reverse the religious terms to bestow a negative effect which is the case with the word “prophets”.⁶³³ On the other hand, some critics find Ely’s words contradictory because of the name he chooses to be his since it alludes to the prophet Elijah. However, Allen Josephs refutes this view arguing that the man asks Ely, “Is your name really Ely?”⁶³⁴ to which he answers “No. [...] I dont want to say it.”⁶³⁵ suggesting that he is nothing more than a “caricature or intentional reversal”⁶³⁶ of the prophet Elijah. So, McCarthy uses Ely as a symbol of atheism in the novel; an old man who abandons his faith in God and dares to openly say “I’m past all that now. Have been for years. Where men cant live gods fare no better.”⁶³⁷ Hence, the absurdity of the devastated world wipes out all the remnants of

⁶³⁰Erik J. Wielenberg, “God, Morality, and Meaning in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*,” *Cormac McCarthy Journal* (Fall 2010): 2.

⁶³¹ McCarthy, *The Road*, 143.

⁶³² McCarthy, *The Road*, 27.

⁶³³ Josephs, “The Quest for God in *The Road*,” 134.

⁶³⁴ McCarthy, *The Road*, 144.

⁶³⁵ McCarthy, *The Road*, 144.

⁶³⁶ Josephs, “The Quest for God in *The Road*,” 135.

⁶³⁷ McCarthy, *The Road*, 145.

spirituality in his heart to declare the birth of an atheist self who survives without the need for the presence of any divine power to assist him. To further illustrate this perception, in a conversation between the man and Ely, the former asks the latter about the “people that gave you food. Where are they? There’s not any people. I just made that up.”⁶³⁸ The answer given by Ely asserts human’s ability to live without the need for God’s providence. To this idea, Wielenburg responds by suggesting that McCarthy’s named character “has survived not through divine assistance but rather through random chance.”⁶³⁹

To conclude, *The Road* reveals the writer’s religious beliefs through the different symbols he uses in constructing the plot of the narrative. Ely is one of these symbols that externalizes McCarthy’s perception of the issue of God in human life. Furthermore, the ideas presented through the character imply that he is a symbol of atheism in the text and a tool in the writer’s hand to insinuate his negative attitudes toward God. This character also reinforces the view that the abandonment of religion declares the rise of a new self that battles with the post-apocalyptic milieu by resisting suicide and surrender.

The analysis unveils McCarthy’s intention to curse God through an attentive choice of the technique of symbolism to convey his philosophical standpoint on the concept of God. This is a consistent account of his symbolic choice of the title to allude to the Godlessness of the setting of the narrative, in addition to the making of the southward trip a spiritual journey to the self. He demonstrates that the confrontation with the absurdity of post-apocalyptic reality breeds the desire to eradicate the fragments of faith within the self. While the reliance on characters to symbolize a certain stream of thoughts is evident in Ely. The latter is the symbol through whom McCarthy aims to insinuate his negative attitudes toward God. It is one way to promote the view

⁶³⁸ McCarthy, *The Road*, 144.

⁶³⁹ Wielenburg, “God, Morality, and Meaning,” 2.

that revolt and the practice of the freedom of choice in a Godless universe may push man forward in his struggle against the absurd. Accordingly, all these ideas are reinforced through another literary technique, imagery, as the following section attempts to illustrate.

2.2.2. The Divine Withdrawal Through Imagery in The Road

2.2.2.1. The Imagery of the Messiah

The Road indicates McCarthy's adoption of Hemingwayesque minimalism, as it signifies his figurative and symbolic language. Then, imagery is one of the techniques that expresses McCarthy's philosophical art. The selection of some of the religious imagery present in the narrative in an attempt to prove that the writer aims to profane God through the destruction of the religious images to promote the rebirth of the free, rebellious self is significant to this study. To start with, let us have a look at the following quotes from the novel

He sat beside him and stroked his pale and tangled hair. *Golden chalice*, good to *house* a *god*. Please dont tell me how the story ends.

He sat holding him while he tousled his hair before the fire to dry it. All of this like some ancient anointing. So be it. Evoke the forms. Where you've nothing else construct ceremonies out of the air and breathe upon them

I didnt know what he was. I never thought to see a child again. I didnt know that would happen.

What if I said that he's a god?

[...] Where men cant live gods fare no better. You'll see. It's better to be alone. So I hope that's not true what you said because to be on the road with the last god would be a terrible thing so I hope it's not true.

The boy would go on and then stop and [...] see him standing there in the road looking back at him from some unimaginable future, glowing in that waste like a *tabernacle*.⁶⁴⁰ [emphasis added]

⁶⁴⁰ McCarthy, *The Road*, 63- 64- 145-230.

The first glance at these excerpts gives us the impression that McCarthy intends to construct imagery of a God-like character who is the savior of humanity; a messiah figure who stands for the future life. But the question to be raised here is: Does McCarthy really celebrate and preserve this Christian imagery in his work? To answer this question, let us go back to the first quote where the narrator externalizes the man's inner thoughts, relying on tropes. The use of the metaphor "golden chalice" in describing the child evokes the Holy Grail as it assimilates him to Christ. Therefore, the father tries to convince himself that the value of the child to him is similar to the icon of the Christian faith- the chalice- to its faithful believers. The use of such a metaphor is due to the fact that the father has previously declared that he is on a holy mission. So, this metaphorical perception of the child adds sanctity to his mission. Moreover, the rest of his sentence reinforces this view when he says "good to *house* a *god*,"⁶⁴¹ which is another metaphor that reveals the boy's deity. Similarly, this representation is what Thomas Schaub perceives as "merely the *invention* of the father- that the father's love of his son is such that he views his son as a 'child of God'"⁶⁴² [Emphasis added]. This deity is emphasized through a simile in the last excerpt: 'like a Tabernacle'. The latter is the 'tent of meeting' that signifies not only the presence of God who dwells among his people but also the divine nature of Jesus. Hence, through the simile, McCarthy intends to make a parallelism between the Christ who led the Israelites through the desert to the Promised Land, and the boy who is the motive behind the father's travel to the South in a quest for better living conditions. While the third quote is a clear declaration from the part of the man that his boy is a god. Therefore, the mental image in the father's mind is transcribed into words. Even the second quote alludes to the same idea through the use of the

⁶⁴¹ McCarthy, *The Road*, 63.

⁶⁴² Thomas H. Schaub, "Secular scripture and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*," *Renascence: Essays on Values in Literature* 61, no. 3 (Spring 2009): 158

simile “All of this like some ancient anointing.”⁶⁴³ McCarthy establishes a link between the father’s act of tousling the boy’s hair before the fire and the ancient anointing which has a religious connotation. In other words, the person being anointed, in Christianity, carries Christ’s burden upon his shoulders. This leads us to suggest that the created imagery evokes the divinity of the boy.

On the other hand, McCarthy intends to profane the Christian imagery, and this is what explains the last sentence in the first quote stated above when the father says “Please dont tell me how the story ends”⁶⁴⁴ right after the declaration of his son as a messiah. To put it another way, if the boy is a true messiah figure, then his survival should never be doubted which suggests that his divinity is a mere illusion: a created story by the father who wishes not to know its end. In the third quote, we also find the atheist Ely openly doubting the boy’s deity when he tells the man that he “hope[s] that’s not true what you said because to be on the road with the last god would be a terrible thing so I hope it’s not true.”⁶⁴⁵ The repetition of the sentence “I hope that’s not true” is inserted on purpose to raise doubt in the reader’s mind about the acclaimed status of the boy. Hence, the aspired holy mission of the man makes him believe in the vicious prophecy of his son. This view is also promoted by McCarthy’s famous female critic, Lydia Cooper, who believes that the “religious symbols and images of regeneration and hope seem to be nothing more than beautiful *delusions*.”⁶⁴⁶ [Emphasis added]. This reading leads us to the answer of the question raised at the opening of the section. At this level, we suggest that McCarthy’s aim behind the reliance on the imagery of the messiah is to reveal his negative attitudes toward Christianity. Hence, the deconstruction of the Christian imagery is a revelation of his philosophical perception

⁶⁴³ McCarthy, *The Road*, 64.

⁶⁴⁴ McCarthy, *The Road*, 63.

⁶⁴⁵ McCarthy, *The Road*, 145.

⁶⁴⁶ Cooper, “Cormac McCarthy’s Heroes,” 189.

of life. In other words, deconstructing these images linguistically is an externalization of the death of God within the writer himself. So, through his language and style, he expresses man's possibility to live and survive without the need for the providence of a divine power whose death announces the birth of the self that creates a purpose for its existence, even if it is a mere delusion, as does his protagonist. The father whom we have considered as the rebel who has recognized the value of life and chooses to challenge the absurd the moment he externalizes his desire to curse God and be the new master of the new world is, eventually, reborn with the freedom to create figments of imagination just to continue his path in life. This character is reincarnated with a rebellious self which is granted full freedom to rule and recreate essence to the post-apocalypse since God no longer exists. This perspective is reinforced through the following imagery.

2.2.2.2. Godless World

Imagery is also relied on in constructing the façade of the absurd universe portrayed in *The Road*. McCarthy's language, in fact, plays a significant role in the transmission of his controversial views about the presence of God in the world. His word choice draws vivid imagery of a Godless universe in the reader's mind as illustrated in the following passage

He walked out in the gray light and stood and he saw for a brief moment the absolute truth of the world. The cold relentless circling of the intestate earth. Darkness implacable. The blind dogs of the sun in their running. The crushing black vacuum of the universe. And somewhere two hunted animals trembling like groundfoxes in their cover. Borrowed time and borrowed world and borrowed eyes with which to sorrow it.⁶⁴⁷

The image evoked in the second sentence of the quote is a description of the truth of the world perceived by the main character, the man, externalized by the narrator. The phrase "The cold

⁶⁴⁷ McCarthy, *The Road*, 110.

relentless circling of the intestate earth”⁶⁴⁸ transmits the sense of an everlasting motion that indicates an endless cycle of grimness which is pointed out through the use of the word “cold”. The latter signifies all the emotions of loneliness and sadness. While the rest of the phrase “relentless circling” evokes feelings of inescapability and despair. Then comes the next phrase, “Darkness implacable,” to convey the inexorable nature of the world which is mysterious, devilish, and untamable. “The crushing black vacuum”⁶⁴⁹ completes the visual image the writer aims to sketch in our minds since the phrase lucidly describes the nothingness that characterizes the McCarthyian fictional universe. In other words, the “black vacuum” he mentions is, in fact, the lightless and senseless void of the world which is stifling. This imagery elicits weird feelings of being swallowed up by that relentless nothingness. Additionally, the metaphorical reference to the two main characters- the man and his son- as ‘hunted animals’ implies that they are in danger because they are chased. Since the insecure environment that they occupy is governed by the jungle rule, McCarthy, for this time, makes use of sensory imagery that assimilates the characters’ vulnerable status to ‘groundfoxes’ evading predators using a simile.

All in all, through language, McCarthy constructs an image, not only in the selected example but throughout the whole work, that emphasizes the existential angst man witnesses when realizing that the absurd universe he is thrown into is devoid of meaning which makes him doubt the very existence of God. To put it another way, the external environment is the reason that makes the father kill God within his self because the world, which is supposed to be The Latter’s creation, contains no signs of His presence. So, the death of God leaves the universe godless which allows the atheist self to come into prominence.

⁶⁴⁸ McCarthy, *The Road*, 110.

⁶⁴⁹ McCarthy, *The Road*, 110.

2.2.2.3. The Rebirth of the Self in Images

The findings of the previous chapter reveal that the death of the father plays a significant role in the boy's inner transformation from innocence to revolt. So, the representation of the boy at the opening of the novel as innocent and moralist suggests that it is the father who shapes the former's self-identity through myth-creation and storytelling. In other words, the myth of Prometheus and the fictional stories about courage and good morals instill the desire to fight for existence in the boy's heart. While the pain of loss grants him a chance to practice the freedom of choice and make decisions that may alter his life direction. Before going into more detail, let us first have a look at the following excerpts from the novel

In some other world the child would already have begun to vacate him from his life. The woman when she saw him put her arms around him and held him. [...] She would talk to him sometimes about God. He tried to talk to God but the best thing was to talk to his father and he did talk to him and he didnt forget.⁶⁵⁰

McCarthy's figurative language constructs vivid imagery of the child's future plans, in which his father will never be a part. To put it another way, the metonymy used in the first sentence, "in some other world,"⁶⁵¹ alludes to the boy's imaginative world or the aspired future. So, the character who was first represented with no sense of self appears in the above quote to develop his own sense of self. On the other hand, the second excerpt reveals an inner transformation of the main persona at the spiritual level. The child, who once stood for morality in the narrative and the messiah who appointed himself as the one who cares for and helps other road travelers, decides to continue fighting the absurd by choosing an alternative to God that would create meaning to his days and nights. The narrator externalizes the boy's inner conflict with faith through the use of the verb "tried," which hints at the feeling of doubt or ambivalence about his

⁶⁵⁰ McCarthy, *The Road*, 230--235.

⁶⁵¹ McCarthy, *The Road*, 230.

true faith which ends with a desire to talk to this divine power to assert its existence. But the rest of the sentence, “but the best thing was to talk to his father,”⁶⁵² is an antithesis that divulges the child’s decision to abandon his old beliefs by choosing a substitute for God: his father’s soul.

Since revolt against the absurd requires a motive in life that would make the struggle seem meaningful to man, the boy succeeds in constructing his sense of self, then creates an illusion- an alternative God- that grants him the power to keep on traveling to the South. So, the constructed imagery is very evocative since it mingles the birth of the self of the only main character who survives by the end with the death of God within his self, to, eventually, confirm the assumption that the existence of the self never requires the presence of God in the world.

Analyzing the use of symbolism and imagery in *The Road* drives us to conclude that McCarthy completely abandoned the early Catholic teachings. Accordingly, his intention to profane the sacredness of the Christian faith can be perceived as a kind of iconoclasm through fiction. These techniques demonstrate the infiltration of McCarthy’s philosophical perception of the God concept into his fiction in a distinct fashion. The analysis confirms the hypothesis that *The Road* exposes the writer’s influence by the Sartrean-Camusian tradition of exploiting literary techniques in disclosing philosophical notions. The techniques used in the novel reveal his implicit declaration of reincarnation of the self at the expense of the death of God in a world perceived as absurd, disordered, and immoral.

In conclusion, both *The Road* and *Suttree* expose man’s existential angst that shapes his response to the absurdity of his existence. The genesis of these inner crises lies in the constant rejection of nihilism and the keen desire to define the self in a world that he evidently finds Godless. Therefore, characters like Ely, the Father, the Son, Suttree, the priest, and the ragman,

⁶⁵² McCarthy, *The Road*, 235.

who are thrown into a setting that fits the themes the writer aims to expose, give us an insight into McCarthy's negative attitudes toward organized religions. Accordingly, the literary techniques that he relies on to assemble a creative pattern bridge the gap between the artistic dimension of the literary works and the reality or philosophical perspective he intends to discuss through fiction. Hence, symbolism, imagery, and the narrative choices identified within *The Road* and *Suttree* reveal the author's intention to deconstruct the religious ethos and promote the rebirth of the self by announcing the death of God in the modern age. The use of these techniques allows him to construct a coherent body infused with existential and absurdist ideals whose accessibility to the reader is facilitated by provoking the addressee to be an active participant in the imaginative pattern. Therefore, the analysis of the techniques present in the chosen works of McCarthy strengthens the assumption that he is the 'prophet of destruction' of the Western religion and defies the silence he adhered to when asked about his religious inclinations.

The current chapter attempts to examine the concept of God in the selected works of Cormac McCarthy and Richard Wright. Its primary concern is to demonstrate the writers' influence by the Sartrean-Camusian perception of the God concept. It initially explores their religious inclinations and then exposes the infiltration of their beliefs into the works of art. To achieve such a goal, the literary techniques the novelists have relied on in developing the theme outline the perspective chosen to approach the corpus. The detailed analysis of the major techniques utilized by both Wright and McCarthy unveils diverse affinities that bind their viewpoints. Though Wright's religious beliefs are known to every reader and critic in his scholarship, McCarthy adhered to silence when asked about his faith. However, his fiction discloses negative attitudes toward organized religions or God, more precisely. Moreover, symbolism, imagery, and narrative choices identified within his two selected novels reveal his

intention to deconstruct the religious ethos and promote the death of God in the modern age. It is the same intent found in the works of Wright. The latter infused his philosophical perception of God into *Native Son* and *The Outsider* to project the chaos of the time. Like in McCarthy's novels, religious symbolism and the narrative perspective in the early novel divulge Wright's anti-religious attitudes against the Christian faith. This opposition is due to the conviction that religion is a means of indoctrination; a coercive means in the White man's hands. This view later becomes central in *The Outsider*, where Wright goes a step further to epitomize Sartre's motto, 'Man fundamentally is the desire to be God'⁶⁵³ through his demigod, Cross Damon. So, both writers intend to profane Christianity through a negative representation of its sacred symbols like the church, the priest or the preacher, and the cross, or by using some characters to symbolize the futility of faith in a meaningless world. In this regard, Ely from *The Road*, Bigger in *Native Son*, and Damon from *The Outsider* promote atheism in the works and reveal the writers' intention to declare the self as a legitimate heir of the dead God in an absurd world. Moreover, the dialogic technique seems to play a significant role in the exposition of the philosophical orientation of both Wright and McCarthy as seen in *The Outsider* and *Suttree*. It reinforces the assumption that both novelists are influenced by the Sartrean-Camusian conception of God. While imagery in *The Road* shows that through language, McCarthy constructs an image that emphasizes the existential angst man witnesses when realizing that the absurd universe he is thrown into is devoid of meaning which makes him doubt the very existence of God Who is, eventually, killed. So, Godlessness is put into images. On the other hand, the monologue in *The Outsider* helps elucidate the serial crimes of Damon that were cultivated by his keen desire to replace the dead God and gain His authority to play a godly game in a world that can never be made right again. Hence, both Wright and McCarthy used different techniques to infuse philosophy into fiction without

⁶⁵³ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 566.

relegating the artistry of their novels. Each with his distinct narrative style and unique outlook portrays Godlessness and the struggles of the modern self in an absurd universe. Both conclude by asserting that the death of God is a reincarnation of the self that restores its equilibrium and shows its readiness to fight for authentic existence. Therefore, this chapter confirms the findings of the second chapter by exploring the link between the death of God and the rebirth of the self. Lastly, both novelists are deeply influenced by the Sartrean-Camusian discourse, and the appropriation of their different philosophical notions proves the hypothesis that the absurdist and existential doctrines haunt the literature of Wright and McCarthy.

GENERAL CONCLUSION

This research is a comparative study of the works of the two Southern American writers, Richard Wright and Cormac McCarthy. The corpus of this doctoral thesis consists of two novels by Wright which are *Native Son* and *The Outsider*, and two others from the catalog of his successor: *Suttree* and *The Road*. Moreover, the study is built on one main question: How can the intersectionality of the Absurd and Existentialism lead to the reincarnation of the self in the fiction of Wright and McCarthy? The investigation of the selected texts reveals the interest of both authors in scrutinizing man's relation to the world around him.

Since the thesis is comparative research, it primarily aims to identify the affinities and differences in the appropriation of the Sartrean-Camusian discourse by Wright and McCarthy. In order to achieve the purpose at hand, the examination of the philosophical perspective of life and the stance on the issue of human existence of each writer is highlighted. This step is necessary in the understanding of the novelists' view, and then tracing the similarities along with the disparity in their treatment of the different concepts may be a less hard task as the work proceeds. Here lies the reason behind the choice of one novel from the early works published by each novelist and one from their later texts. To put it another way, exploring the philosophical standpoint of any writer requires a careful look at more than one work to identify the continuity or change in his conceptualization of the matter. Therefore, *Native Son* offers us free access to the mind of Wright that exposes his 'philosophy of experience' which stems from his life events in the South under Jim Crow laws. This reality compels him to question the essence of human existence and makes him start a long-lasting quest for meaning. These thematic concerns are manifested in *The Outsider* but with more maturity which allies him with the absurdist and existential doctrines. Hence, the present research reveals continuity in thoughts of Wright in terms of perspective and themes.

On the other hand, *Suttree* and *The Road* fall within the same philosophical context as those of Wright. Precisely, McCarthy tackles similar themes but in a quite different tone and insight. The first was published in 1979, and the second in 2006. Death, the deterioration of human nature, and the fragility of faith are chosen to be the bond that brings them under one philosophical stance. The shift in the interest in universality coupled with the existential mode in the works of the Afro-American writer is the first reason behind their selection to be studied along with those of McCarthy, since it is a proclivity in the fiction of the Pulitzer Prize-winning writer. Starting from this common ground, the thesis suggests that Wright hands the torch to McCarthy, who takes the oath of transmitting the message to contemporary man.

The second objective of the study is to identify the echoes of the absurdist and existential discourses in the works of both Southern writers. Though the appropriation of Wright differs from the one McCarthy suggests due to the former's socio-cultural background and the specificities of Afro-American fiction, their choice of themes and the narrative techniques that merge with the concepts that Camus and Sartre propose as an explanation of the different reactions of the self when facing the absurdity of life is what bond their works to the doctrine of the French scholars.

In line with this insight, the first chapter of the thesis tackles the concept of alienation in the texts of Wright and McCarthy and divulges their adaptation of the notion to the specificities of American literature. Awareness of the absurdity of human life first drives man to question the essence of his existence and then shifts his interest to the world around him, seeking answers. When this universe fails to quench his thirst for clarity and meaning, alienation is the stumbling block that makes him unable to be on his feet again and heal his wounded self. Hence, Wright and McCarthy elucidate the link between self-alienation and the absurd. The arguments of the

research are presented throughout the three sections of the chapter. The first is under the title: “A Stranger to Oneself: Cormac McCarthy’s and Richard Wright’s Perception of Self-alienation”. The textual analysis reveals that McCarthy and Wright expose a distinctive appropriation of the Sartrean-Camusian concept of self-alienation. Therefore, both writers –each with his own discrete identity or vision- explore the inner crises of the contemporary man who is trapped in living an absurd life. As a result, self-estrangement is born when man first starts questioning everything around him, even himself. Man ends up being a stranger even to his self when he realizes his inability to define the self because of the lack of knowledge about this self which is chased in the material world among the ruins of an old lodging place or in between old possessions as pictured in *The Road*, or by contrasting oneself with those with whom we share this world: The Other as seen in Wright’s *Native Son*.

Sharing a dual vision that brings psychology along with the absurdist-existential view, McCarthy opts for *Bad Faith* to expose the other form of self-alienation in the 1979 novel, *Suttree*. On the other hand, Wright demonstrates that this type of estrangement can be the result of an external force. In other words, *The Outsider* divulges that man witnesses self-alienation due to the constraints of his facticity. Hence, both novelists discuss the different facets of self-estrangement which is considered the first station in the characters’ journey to create their selves; the person they will be.

Wright and McCarthy have explored another dimension of the concept which is often neglected by critics in this field of research. They have discussed the consequences of self-alienation on the individual’s interpersonal relations. The analysis of the four texts reveals that the shattered self of the created stranger leads to his social estrangement due to his awareness of the differences between himself and the Other. McCarthy and Wright have represented this alien

being as a serious threat to the conventional social order by attributing to him anti-social attitudes and a violent nature. This aspect is, in fact, highlighted in order to direct a harsh critique of the social system and man's deeds that ravage American society.

As the alien being finds himself estranged from his family, society, and his self, the quest for a safe space where the self manifests its existence is the first reaction to the absurd which Wright and McCarthy have explored in fiction. This reaction is escapism; an act of escaping to one's imaginative world which is chosen to occupy due to the early failure to identify one's own place in a world that resists all sorts of meaning and order.

Hence, the findings of the chapter can be summed up as follows. The Southern writers have adapted the concept of alienation with its two forms to their literature in order to elaborate on man's first reaction to the absurdity of life. In other words, they demonstrate that when a man starts questioning his existence and seeking answers, alienation is the first trap in his journey to create himself and chase meaning in a seemingly senseless world. Accordingly, the desire to feel one's existence is what has led the strangers to dwell in a world of their creation where their selves are reborn.

On the other hand, such feelings of estrangement may drive the individual to be a victim of some dark thoughts, like nihilism. The failure to identify any purpose for life and the belief that death or committing suicide is the only possible way to draw an end to the futile suffering is another reaction to the absurdity of the universe. This is mainly due to the realization that the imaginative world is no longer comforting, so the strangers move into action through suicide. All these details and more are discussed in the second chapter of the thesis.

Tracing the link between the death of the self and the rebirth of a new rebellious self which raises the challenge to defeat the absurd by asserting its freedom of choice and creating a purpose for its existence, is the aim of chapter two. The latter seeks to demonstrate the way the death of the mind and the self may generate the reincarnation of a new self, either within oneself or within others, that fight to impose its own laws on the world as a whole. We argued that excluding the existence of other possibilities in life leaves the door open for the creep of some dark ideas that will be in control of all the behaviors and actions of the person. In this regard, suicide is, therefore, perceived as the only way to put an end to the absurd and win the battle. This perspective is best explored in *The Road* by McCarthy through the suicide scene of the female character called 'the mother'. However, *Suttree* suggests another facet that shows the extent to which man's obsession with the dead may lead him to desire death and think about suicide as a relief to his shattered self. Alternatively, Wright's Black heroes are represented as a true personification of universal motifs. This suggests that the suffering of the Afro-Americans is a simple example of the pain endured by all minority groups all over the world. This demonstrates that the submissiveness of the Blacks is rooted in their culture and inherited ethics. Hence, Wright examined another type of suicide which is termed by Camus 'philosophical suicide'. *Native Son* and *The Outsider* reveal the influence of the Black American writer by such a conceptualization. Accordingly, Wright and McCarthy confess that escapism from the absurd through death, be it physical through suicide or philosophical through the sacrifice of the mind and the self, is a failure and a wrong choice because the absurd never ends with the death of the self.

One of the striking ideas discussed by both fiction writers is the shift from submission or what can also be termed nihilism to revolt and the practice of the freedom of choice. The textual

analyses of the four works reveal that the death experience is the stimulus that spurs the reincarnation of the rebellious self. Precisely, Wright and McCarthy expose their opposition to the coward reaction to the meaninglessness of life and suggest that killing oneself or escaping to other institutions seeking relief from futile suffering is a mere death of the self and the mind that never ends the absurd, but it declares us losers in the battle. In this regard, physical suicide or the suicide of the mind that kills also the self can never draw an end to the absurdity of human existence; it is only revolt, and the practice of freedom by creating oneself and making a project in life is what really weakens the absurd. The research comes to this conclusion in the second part of chapter two which details the transition to revolt and freedom of choice. Wright and McCarthy disclose that this shift is the result of the transcendence of the fear of death and the realization that suffering is part of the game of existence since it gives life its own value. Such a perspective can be traced in *The Road*, for instance, through the suicide of a nihilist mother, which makes 'the father' value his life and abandon the old thoughts of committing suicide and killing his son to avoid future suffering. It can also be evident in the other character, the boy, who appears to be obsessed with the fear of death in the early stages of the narrative, but after his father's death, he takes the oath to carry the fire, which his father enlightens in his heart, to the South. Therefore, transcending the fear of death and seeking other possibilities by taking the choice to exist and create a project for life in addition to rebelling against the meaninglessness of our existence proves to be the only possible ways to face the absurdity of life. Hence, the death of other beings and one's near-death experience generate a sense of revolt in other selves and within oneself. Accordingly, Bigger's rebellious self comes into prominence the moment he realizes the death of Mary Dalton. This leads us to the same conclusion drawn above about McCarthy's *The Road*; death awakens a sense of revolt in another self and leads to its reincarnation. When we consider *Suttree* and *The Outsider*, we realize that they are bound by the same plot line. Both protagonists

are intellectuals and used to be obsessed with the fear of death. They end up undergoing a death experience that makes them value life and grants them the freedom to reconstruct their selves and rearrange their world.

The analyses have driven us to the following findings. First, both Wright and McCarthy consider suicide as an act of cowardice to the meaninglessness of human existence since it declares us losers and turns the scale in favor of the absurd. The latter dies only when we turn away from it since life is better lived when we become aware of its absurdity, since we free ourselves from all the restraints, especially death. Therefore, one lives with no fear or angst; a free man who imposes his own law on the world. This rebellious nature is advocated by the two Southern writers in the four selected novels. They demonstrate that challenging the absurd through the practice of freedom and revolt are what defy it and inaugurate us victors of the game. This is definitely what Sartre and Camus called for in their discourses. Hence, we come to the end to confirm the novelists' adaptation of the Sartrean-Camusian perspective to their fiction. We can go further in this interpretation to suggest that even their personal convictions are influenced by such a stream of thought.

The above concluding views that we came to by the end of chapter two raise one more question that requires another chapter to answer: how do both writers reveal the reincarnation of the self? Or how can we trace or prove the rebirth of the self in their works? In this regard, Wright and McCarthy advocate revolt and freedom of choice as the only possible reactions that man has to choose to keep on living and grant value to his existence. Such a perspective is, on the one hand, an adaptation of the idea proposed by Camus which shows revolt as a challenge to the meaning created by God and even to His power, just like the archetypal hero Sisyphus, whose disregard for the Gods grants him true happiness. The pleasure found in the midst of the absurd is

a sort of meaning, though real meaning can never be created and found, still considered meaning realized through the practice of freedom. On the other hand, the echoes of such a perspective are identified in Sartre's view which considers man as freedom. Here lies the link between the three elements: revolt, freedom, and the rebirth of the self. Freedom of man for both thinkers requires the death of God and the rejection of any sort of meaning related to Him since man is abandoned in a chaotic, meaningless universe. Hence, it is only after the realization of the death of God that the rebellious self comes into prominence. It is at this level that we reach the final stage of the current research, to demonstrate how such philosophical concepts allow Wright and McCarthy to expose the reincarnation of the new self in their fiction.

Going through the religious convictions of both novelists leads us to suggest that they share the same stance as Camus and Sartre: atheism. Seeking innovation in research is the reason behind the choice to rely on literary techniques in exposing the way Wright and McCarthy reveal the reincarnation of the self by declaring the death of God. This is the main concern of the last chapter of the thesis. It reveals that characters from *The Road* and *Suttree* like Ely, the Father, the Son, Suttree, the priest, and the ragman, who are thrown into a setting that fits the themes the writer aims to expose, give us an insight into McCarthy's negative attitudes toward God. Correspondingly, the literary techniques relied on in both texts prove such a claim. In other words, the examination of the different religious symbols and imagery, for instance, present in *The Road*, drives us to suggest that McCarthy intends to profane the sacredness of the Christian faith and promote the withdrawal of God from life and his abandonment of man in the midst of the chaos. Therefore, the destruction of the divine grants man the freedom to create himself and the essence of his existence without the need for the guidance of the Christian God. Such a perspective is also identified in *Suttree* through the narrative choices he uses to assemble a

creative pattern that combines artistry and philosophy. Moreover, investigating the diversity in the narrative point of view in *Suttree* confirms the view that reliance on more than one limited narrative perspective is one way used by McCarthy to reveal his disregard for God. This technique grants him a wider influence on the reader, whom he aims to welcome his viewpoint because his work concerns and brings to question the inner troubles of the sick self that seeks rebirth and freedom even in fiction. The dialogic structure is another choice made by McCarthy to extensively discuss the issue. It is the space where he can intervene to directly expose his convictions in the tongue of one of the characters. Eventually, the two literary texts, *The Road* and *Suttree*, reveal the religious leaning of the writer and expose his intention to kill God and grant the torch to the self to be the master of its world. In other words, the rebellious self he creates can never exist if he does not give it the freedom to be and rule by eliminating the existence of the divine power, because the co-existence of the two contending powers is not possible.

In the other two novels of Wright, we have identified similar stances. *Native Son* divulges his intention to examine the way religion can determine man's perception of life. The analyses of some of the religious symbols lead us to suggest that he aims to criticize the Whites' faith that authorizes them to enslave, dehumanize, and subordinate other humans under the guise of religion. Therefore, the main character of *Native Son* is the voice that promotes the death of God and reveals the writer's intention to curse the symbols of Christianity through the negative representation of its sacred symbols, like the church, the cross, and even the preacher. The thesis also proves that the writer declares the reincarnation of the Black self the moment it refutes the meaning that faith in God offers to life and goes on to create itself and seek its own meaning, though it is aware of the absurdity of the quest itself. On the other hand, *The Outsider* brings to

the forefront a different insight into man's freedom of choice. Accordingly, the protagonist Damon is the rebel who overcomes the socio-religious constraints and chooses to inaugurate himself as a little god. In other words, Wright exposes man's inner desire to replace the dead God who is himself His assassin. So, he fictionalizes Sartre's motto 'Man fundamentally is the desire to be God'⁶⁵⁴ by creating a demigod and attributing to him the freedom of creation that only God possesses. Thus, he kills God and declares the rebirth of his heir on earth: man.

By the end of this chapter, we can draw the following results. The selected Southern writers share the same religious inclinations, and their fiction better proves this hypothesis. The detailed analyses of the major techniques utilized by both Wright and McCarthy unveil diverse affinities that bound their viewpoints, regardless of the differences in the choice of techniques and the way of appropriating the French discourse to their novels. Both writers believe in the impossibility of the co-existence of the freedom of man and the presence of God. Hence, both announce and promote the death of God which results in the rebirth of the self that is given the freedom to create oneself and meaning to life. This freedom is what constitutes the essence of revolt against the absurd, and without it, man can never escape nihilism.

The present research proposes an existential reading from the perspective of Camus and Sartre of four works belonging to the two great Southern writers, Wright and McCarthy. As the findings of the three chapters suggest, the two novelists are influenced by the theoretical ideas of the French thinkers. This influence is traced in their fiction and proved through the analysis of the different inklings identified in their works. This doctoral thesis also reveals the similarities and differences between both writers in the appropriation of the discourse to their texts. One of the

⁶⁵⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay in Phenomenological Ontology*, Trans. Hazel Barnes (New York, New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), 566.

main concerns of the present study is to examine the different reactions of the self to the absurd and the way the selected authors reveal its reincarnation. In the four novels, we examined the impacts of the absurd on the self which results in its alienation from itself and from the world, to eventually reside in a world of its creation; this is the first reaction highlighted. This sense of estrangement may lead to the infiltration of some dark thoughts, such as nihilism. The latter is the direct consequence of the individual's failure to find other possibilities in life and a response to the discomfort of the alternative world he escapes to. Therefore, suicide or the desire for death is the only option nihilism offers as a solace to the wounded self. This reaction is what Wright and McCarthy reject since it never brings relief, mainly due to the fact that the absurd never ends with suicide, but it affirms it. On the other hand, revolt and the steps one takes to create his essence are advocated by both novelists by creating free absurd heroes who challenge the universe and impose their own law on it. The essence of this reaction is the freedom attributed to the self which allows it to move to action and create itself. So, Wright and McCarthy announce the rebirth of the rebellious self by killing God. In other words, the declaration of the death of God undoubtedly results in the reincarnation of the self that comes to power. Lastly, this thesis closes by confirming the success of Wright and McCarthy in their adaptation of the French philosophical discourse which allows them to announce the rebirth of the self amidst the absurd.

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Résumé

La présente thèse de doctorat, vise à étudier et à comparer les travaux littéraires des écrivains de sud des États-Unis : Richard Wright et Cormac McCarthy. Précisément, *Un Enfant du Pays*, *L'e Transfuge* et enfin *Suttree* et *La Route* montrent la contribution à la promotion des multiples enclins vers l'absurdisme et l'existentialisme; des quels découleraient la réincarnation de soi. Il est également mis en évidence dans cette étude, l'intérêt des ces écrivains, aux problématiques contemporaines, qu'ils exposent d'ailleurs d'une manière singulière et dans un style narratif distinct. L'analyse portée sur ces ouvrages, révèle l'adoption et l'adaptation des auteurs, du discours de Jean-Paul Sartre et celui d'Albert Camus. Cette étude est fondée sur les principes philosophiques des deux auteurs français. De ce fait, les analyses présentées, comme l'isolement sous ses deux formes, la mort ou ce que l'on appelle le suicide, le principe de liberté de choix, de révolution ; que l'on retrouve dans les ouvrages étudiés ; appuient l'existence de

l'influence de la philosophie des auteurs français. Cela se traduit par le succès des deux écrivains, consistant en l'intégration de celle-ci à la nature du romain Américain. A cela s'ajoute la position affichée par ces écrivains quand à la question de la mort du dieu qui se dévoile dans leurs propres tendances religieuses. Ainsi, en se basant sur les techniques de narration que l'on retrouve dans les ouvrages étudiés, il apparaît qu'effectivement, ceux –ci sont des athées. Autrement dit, ce travail de recherche, constitue un argument de taille pour affirmer l'attachement des deux auteurs Américains au concept de mort de Dieu, en considérant la conviction encrée en eux, devant débiter par la déconstruction de toute croyance ou lien à une divinité, conduit nécessairement à la réincarnation de soi et à assoir la disposition à lutter pour exister dans l'absurde.

Mots clés : Richard Wright, Cormac McCarthy, l'absurdisme, l'existentialisme, mort de Dieu, la réincarnation de soi.

ملخص

تهدف أطروحة الدكتوراه هذه إلى مقارنة النصوص الأدبية لكاتبين من الجنوب الأمريكي : ريتشارد رايت و كورماك مكارثي كما تسلط الضوء تحديدًا على روايات ابن البلد، اللامنتمي، ساتري و الطريق. تظهر الدراسة اشتراك جل الروايات في ازدواجية التوجه نحو العبثية و الوجودية و التي تمخض عنها إعادة بعث الذات. كما تبرز نصوص الدراسة اهتمام الأدبيين بإشكاليات العصر المعروضة بأسلوب سردي مميز. إضافة إلى ذلك تكشف هذه الأطروحة عن تبني و تكيف مكارثي و رايت للخطاب السارتر-الكاموزي في رواياتهم. بنيت هذه الرسالة على أساس المفاهيم النظرية المقترحة من قبل سارتر و كامو. و عليه، فإن التحليل المقدم لمفاهيم كالعزلة بنوعها و الموت أو ما يعرف بالانتحار بالإضافة إلى مبدأ حرية الاختيار و الثورة في الروايات الأربعة تثبت تأثر الروائيين بفلسفة المفكرين الفرنسيين. ويعتبر هذا بمثابة نجاح لكل من مكارثي و رايت في ملائمة هذه الفلسفة لطبيعة الرواية الأمريكية. علاوة على ذلك، تكشف الأطروحة موقف الكاتبين من إشكالية موت الإله كما تمحص في توجههما الديني. و بناء على تحليل تقنيات السرد لكلا الروائيين يتجلى توجههما الملحد. أي بمعنى آخر، يعتبر هذا البحث إثباتًا لدعم الأدبيين الأمريكيين لمفهوم موت الإله من خلال الإقرار باقتران مدلول هدم قدسية الآلة بإعادة بعث الذات التي استعادت توازنها و أظهرت استعدادها للمحاربة من أجل تحقيق وجودها في عالم عبثي.

الكلمات المفتاحية ريتشارد رايت, كورماك مكارثي, العبثية, الوجودية, الخطاب السارترى-الكاموزي, موت الإله, إعادة بعث الذات.