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African American Existential Heroes: Narrative Struggles for Authenticity

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AFRICAN AMERICAN EXISTENTIAL HEROES: NARRATIVE STRUGGLES

FOR AUTHENTICITY

by

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ABSTRACT

African American Existential Heroes: Narrative Struggles for Authenticity

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African American Existential Heroes: Narrative Struggles for Authenticity
argues for the development of existential authenticities and their impact on African
American self-identity constructions in three African American literary classics:
Richard Wright's *The Outsider*, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, and James Baldwin's
Go Tell It on the Mountain. For that purpose, the introduction puts forward the
aforementioned topic; defines the major terms, *authenticity*, *existentialism*, and *African
Americanness*; identifies the three texts to be studied; explicates its methodology;
studies the *anagnorisis* of each text in relation to the existential crisis; accounts for the
existential philosophers used, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Soren
Kierkegaard; and then elaborates on the overall structure of the dissertation, an
introduction, three chapters with three sections each, and a conclusion. In Chapter One,
"Richard Wright's *The Outsider* and African American Existential Authenticity," the
dissertation centers on the main character's inauthenticity as expressed through his
existential crisis: his fanatical desire to be free. What is revealed, though, is his
monomaniacal desire to have power over everyone and everything that leads to a
destructive nihilism. The study then follows how the main character overcomes his

inauthenticity and how it impacts his sense of being an African American. In Chapter

Two, "Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*: Invisibility and African American Existential

Authenticity," the focus is on the main character's existential inauthenticity that comes

primarily from his invisibility to himself. The examination then turns to how his

inauthenticity is resolved through his realization of the visibility-invisibility dialectic

that impacts his African American self-making. Chapter Three, "James Baldwin's *Go

Tell It on the Mountain* and African American Existential Authenticity," analyzes the

existential inauthenticity that comes from the fourteen-year-old main character's

existential dread and despair. The ostensible impediments for his self-making are

mainly two: his sense of wickedness and his perceived sin, which are found to come

from his struggle with his stepfather and his incipient homosexuality. The analysis,

then, details his development towards authenticity as a result of his experience with

what Pentecostal Christians call the Holy Spirit, which gives the main character visions

of an ecumenically loving God that impacts his self-making as an African American.

The conclusion presents a meditative summation of the dissertation and takes into

account the perennial significance of African American existential analysis and the need

to utilize it for further analysis of other African American literary works produced

before and after the twentieth century.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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African American Existential Heroes: Narrative Struggles for Authenticity

The purpose of the dissertation will be to study three classic African American novels, specifically Richard Wright's *The Outsider* (1953), Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), and James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), as existential arguments in order to show that each author produces his own version of the African American hero's struggle for existential authenticity. With *authenticity*, I am initially adopting Heidegger's definition of the term, which *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* sums up as "The condition of those, according to Heidegger, who understand the existential structure of their lives. Heidegger held that each of us acquires an identity from our situation—our family, culture, etc. Usually, we just absorb this identity uncritically, but to let one's values and goals remain fixed without critical reflection on them is 'inauthentic'."[1] To shorten Heidegger's distinction between the existentially inauthentic and authentic in the dissertation, however, I will label the former as existentially *unconscious* (or having a They-Self) and the latter as existentially *conscious* (or having an I-Self).

With regard to using particular philosophical terms without definitions or explication so far, I admit that I am very much getting ahead of myself. That is, what exactly does *existentialism* mean? When one considers Jean-Paul Sartre's famous critique of the term that "The word is now so loosely applied to so many things in so many ways

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[1] Keep in mind that adopting Heidegger's definition of the term refers to my using his concept of *authenticity* as a tentatively accepted working definition from which I anticipate a significant difference, and thus a challenge, from the proposed works of the aforementioned three authors.

that it no longer means anything at all," one should know how extremely important it is to specify its definition. First, it is important to clarify what Sartre means by his critique: it

is not the case that *existentialism* "no longer means anything at all" in that the word refers to "nothing." No, the quote means quite the opposite of that: what it actually means is that "nothing" means "no thing" so that *existentialism* has too many definitions to denote any particular thing.

Knowing that *existentialism* means too many things, or that it suffers from what linguists diagnose as polysemy, which definition should one use? Should one simply use Sartre's famous "existence precedes essence," from his work? Many scholars have used that phrase to define existentialism. In fact, this Sartrean definition has been used so many times and in so many ways that many now equate it and Sartre with existentialism itself. However, there are at least three problems with using the Sartrean phrase as the definition. First, many existentialists wholeheartedly reject it. This is very much the case with such a prominently labeled existential philosopher as Heidegger, who, in "A Letter on Humanism," declared that if existentialism is what Sartre claims it to be, then he, Heidegger, is no existentialist.

Other existential philosophers have followed suit. Gabriel Marcel, Martin Merleau-Ponty, and Paul Tillich, and many, many more have rejected the renowned Sartrean definition: they simply do not see it applying to their philosophical endeavors concerning the human condition. The second problem, as Marcel, Merleau-Ponty, and Tillich also have testified to, is that the definition is indubitably atheistic. It leaves not a speck of spiritual essence for one to begin to exist. Obviously, for that reason, existential theists will emphatically reject the Sartrean definition. Finally, with such a definition,

well-known earlier existentialists such as Kierkegaard and Nietzsche could never be counted as existentialists: they never dealt with the distinction between essence and existence in their philosophies on human existence.

So, to go back to square one, to appropriately ground the dissertation with a properly articulated definition of *existentialism*, which one should I use? I readily confess that this issue could go on and on *ad nauseum*. In fact, one could write a whole new dissertation on that subject alone. However, I propose that the dissertation produce the definition at its most general so that I may particularize it as I continue to focus on the topic. For that reason, I propose defining *existentialism* as "the study of the structure, meaning, and purpose of human life." It is important to keep in mind that this definition is not a philosophically analytic one in the traditional sense that it comprehends the subject in the form of a tightly condensed tautology, as mathematics ($E=MC^2$) and logic ([P&Q] v R) can do. No, the proffered definition is one of the open-ended types given to such equally, if not more, complex subjects such as *biology*, "the study of life," *geology*, "the study of the earth," *cosmology*, "the study of the universe," whereby open-ended means that these definitions allow for complexities to emerge while one is intensely and meticulously engaging in an analysis of a particular subject.

Moreover, in the following, I have listed a cadre of major concepts that the existentialist philosophers have emphasized as important to the study of the topic: self-making vs self-discovery, individual vs society, intuition vs reason, subjective morality vs objective morality, anxiety (dread) and/or despair vs objective detachment, freedom vs determinism, and a non-existing God vs an existing One. Out of the list of these major existential contrasts, I will privilege existential freedom as basic for a person to possess

agency. That is, for the sake of the analysis, I presuppose a person's existential liberty as being fundamental to any action that he or she may choose to take. In that very limited sense, I readily identify the dissertation as being Sartrean, and if an *apologia* were appropriate, I would attempt a justification here. With that said, the dissertation will analyze the main character from each of the three mentioned texts by putting forward the primary question of whether or not as a hero the protagonist is consciously actualizing his existential freedom to form an I-Self, which one can equate with Heidegger's definition of authenticity.

I will also target the main character's existential crisis as it fits into the narrative structure. By *existential crisis*, I am referring to the moment in the narrative when the main character produces a Munchian scream of deep anguish from dread and/or despair that comes from someone not consciously choosing to choose freedom in his or her own life. By *narrative structure*, I am referring to whether and how the existential crisis fits into the plot-structure of the story, especially as part of the *anagnorisis*, or main character's main recognition. In analyzing the two together, the existential crisis and the narrative structure, readers will be able to see the underlying existential argument that the author produces. They will be able to see whether and how the author posits the existential crisis as part of major narrative contentions (the conflict and/or significant complications), which in turn will allow readers to both comprehend and, hopefully, appreciate the existential argument.

Knowing that the dissertation will analyze the existential argument by tracing it through the plot-structure of each of the three narratives allows readers to also understand that I am approaching each text by mainly using a close reading approach. This means

that the dissertation will primarily focus on providing relevant examples from the texts that illustrate the existential argument while concomitantly revealing how it helps the narrative develop. In doing so, readers will see that I am not simply engaging in keeping an argument on a meta level that is so abstracted from the text that, ironically, nothing is really said about the author's work itself. Secondly, readers should also see that I am not simply selecting evidence from the text to make the case while ignoring or suppressing other material that may contradict it. That is, in analyzing the existential argument and the plot-structure together, I will be forced to consider the work not only in parts but as a whole, which, hopefully, will help produce a consistency and coherence for the thesis and in the dissertation itself. Finally, by directing the readers' attention to the texts, I hope that we will remember to appreciate the impact of the novels themselves, since at times, in literary or academic idolatry, some may think of the masters more than their works.

I also want to make the point that I am not attempting to challenge the authors' arguments with regard to their particular takes on African American existential authenticity. That is, I am attempting to present faithfully each of the authors' philosophical disputations descriptively so that I and my readers may be better able to see and understand what each of the authors is attempting to do in terms of the stated topic. For that purpose, I am using an approach that attempts to follow the arguments of the authors without judging whether or not I actually agree with them. I am simply tracing the arguments from the narratives as the writers present them. Such a descriptive approach allows the dissertation to proceed effectively in at least three major ways.

First, using a descriptive approach allows me to focus on the texts the way the authors wanted them to be read. In that sense, I am attempting to simply get out of their

way so that they can show what they have produced. Second, in relation to the topic, I very much want to avoid bias. That is, I want to avoid selecting parts of the narratives to fit what I would like them to be. Since I have studied much on the subject of African American existentialism, I know that my admiration for the masters (Wright, Ellison, and Baldwin) can bend me towards what I already believe on the subject. Finally, I am very well aware that even though these authors reflect deeply on the African American existential topic in their own works, they are not writing for the sake of primarily conforming to or confirming any philosophical or theoretical notions. That is, each writer is earnestly prioritizing the genuine portrayal of the life of his protagonist, and for that reason, each of them configures the main character's existential experience as he deems appropriate.

Having given necessary background information that puts forward some initial working definitions, caveats, and suggestions that will hopefully make the reading of the dissertation a successful one, I must come completely round again to account for the term *African American*. That is, it is extremely important for one to define or account for what that term means. As was the case with *existentialism*, *African American* can mean so many things that one can easily fall into deep ambiguity and say that it means nothing at all. Like *existentialism*, however, it does mean something. For that, though, I directly refer to the academically well-accepted definition that *African American* is a "social construct" whose meaning has continually changed throughout different places and times: "The idea that race is socially constructed implies also that it can and must be constructed differently at different historical moments and in different social contexts" (Holt 1).

Moreover, major scholarly works that focus on the existentialism and African

American topic, as in N. C. Manganyi's *Being-Black-in-the-World*, Lewis R. Gordon's *Existentia Africana*, and Robert Reid-Pharr's *Once You Go Black*, have themselves put forward and emphasized that in different places and times, African Americans have continually constructed race so that the term inevitably has various and varied meanings and purposes for readers who have read, observed, and studied them. As Manganyi, Gordon, and Reid-Pharr note, for instance, such meaningful and purposeful social constructions stem directly from a person's subjective but real experience of existential freedom, a highly intuitive experience that readily coincides with both Sartre's particular philosophic conceptualization of existentialism when he defines it as "existence precedes essence," while at the same time allowing one to expand on his definition since it allows the possibility of the unconscious to be part of one's consciousness, which Sartre would vehemently disallow in his existential psychology.

To ground the topic, then, I will not only adopt but adapt Heidegger's definition of *authenticity*. In other words, I will also be complementing the definition with Manganyi's, Gordon's, and Reid-Pharr's account of existential agency and social construction. However, it is also important to include a key psychoanalytic point that Reid-Pharr presented in his *Once You Go Black* in which his imagined youth who reflects on the African American existential topic in the introduction of the work is struck and even galvanized by the following insight: "Indeed the young intellectual is shocked to find himself wondering if race is not actually lived *as* desire" (4). As Reid-Pharr implies through his imagined young intellectual, one can account for the impulse to construct race itself, which fundamentally reveals itself to be a desire in immediately situated interactive lives. That is, through desire, one can account for the psychological spark that both

ignites, propels, and sustains a person's power to be an agent who can freely choose to make categories (general constructs such as race, nationality, gender, and so on) and their particular modalities (specific constructs such as black, American, male, and so on) of existence as a self with others.

Along these lines, I will tentatively put forward the idea that the African American existential hero is an African American protagonist who actualizes his or her claim that one's individuality derives from the freedom to choose to make a self (an I-Self). For that reason, having desire as one's initial psychological drive, the protagonist as an existential agent can freely choose to creatively form, affirm, and even deny racial constructions of identities. Moreover, this particular account recognizes the importance of the Sartrean idea of existential responsibility. The protagonist must consciously reflect, plan, and actualize one's life construction. When the person does, depending on the protagonist's ethical fidelity to his or her plan, that person can be deemed, and/or redeemed, as either an existentially authentic or inauthentic being with reference to his or her own particular existence.

To continue foregrounding the analysis of African American existential heroes of authenticity here, I will also put forward a *structural dialectics of desire* as a methodology for the study. By this, I mean that I will use a focused, organized, and step-by-step approach that explicitly and meticulously takes into account the production of self and race as categories and modalities of individuals and social constructs. I especially want to use this methodology in order to highlight the view that structures can both express individual and social constructs from multiple binary oppositions that give way to syntheses deriving from individual and collective psychological drives.

Moreover, by using a *structural dialectics of desire* for the study, we may be able to obtain an even more in-depth view of the processes involved in constructing individuals and societies, specifically through constructed expressions of the self and race. I can justify using this methodology with several reasons. First, because scholars of structures, particularly in the study of ideologies, have long accounted for the subjectivity that forms individuals and societies, one can take advantage of the abundance of scholarship on the topic from them. Moreover, this methodology involves recognizing and implementing the power of the dialectic. The dialectic, a term having evolved from and been enhanced by such notable thinkers such as Plato, Hegel, and Marx, involves seeing various and varied theses and antitheses in binary oppositions that give way to syntheses.

When viewed specifically as an existential dialectic, such a study can help readers understand that certain experiential constructions are favored over others. For instance, a narrative that privileges a traditional Christian view will tend to emphasize existential self-discovery over self-making, since, in general, Christianity produces the traditional Western view that, contra Sartre, essence precedes existence, which favors the concept that a person already has a pre-existing self (in this case, an *a priori* God-given soul and/or spirit). Finally, I can use this methodology to explain the source of what motivates a person's particular expression of freedom--desire. For this reason, this aspect of the methodology allows one to realize that a simple description of existential freedom is not enough.

Moreover, I can provide several reasons for selecting the three proposed works for the dissertation. First, I have observed that most studies of existential literature readily

identify Wright's *The Outsider*, Ellison's *Invisible Man*, and Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* as examples of the existential and African American literary genres. I am also convinced that they are. In fact, one ancillary goal of the dissertation is to study why each of the works is identified as existential. By understanding the underlying reasons, the reader will be able to examine the criteria that scholars use to justify applying the designation to such works.

Another reason for choosing these three works is that we need to limit the analysis to narratives that attempt to account directly for the African American experience. This particular optic will allow us to see that these writers produce stories with individuals, families, and worlds that are imaginative representations of each author's own contemporary view of the African American experience. In *The Outsider*, for instance, Wright details the life of his main character, Cross Damon, in Chicago and New York City during the late 1940s, at the end of WWII and the beginning of the Cold War. Through Cross, we can see a life of deep repression stemming from a multitude of stultifying conditions in the North, particularly in the South Side of Chicago, in which racism against blacks is just one of many impeding factors. As a result of these factors, we can witness the gradual intensification of Cross's loneliness and anger as deriving from his heightened intelligence, which reveals a life of isolation, diminution, and frustrated potential, which ultimately turns into a life that descends into desperate violence in a wayward search for fanatical freedom.

Even though there are enough works to justify African American existential literature as a legitimate sphere of scholarship independent in its own right, a general literary review of the topic does reveal that it cuts an extremely narrow and thorny path

across at least three major academic fields: African American studies, existential

philosophy, and American literature. For that reason, I acknowledge that there are very

few books and articles that focus directly and exclusively on the triune topic proposed

here.

A sober, and obvious, first approach to the literature is to follow the texts that

directly and exclusively focus on the subject so that one can study these texts as

foundational materials for the dissertation. For that purpose, it is, again, important to

mention Manganyi's *Being-Black-in-the-World*, Gordon's *Existentia Africana*, and Reid-

Pharr's *Once You Go Black*. However, I can use important primary and secondary

tangential studies to analyze the available literature from each of the fields mentioned so

that I can derive an even richer and more inclusively developed analysis of the texts. To

do that, it is important to put forward the significant works concerning the topic from

Anthony Appiah, James Cone, and Cornel West, among others.

Overall, the dissertation will be organized into an introduction, three chapters with

three sections each, and a conclusion. In the introduction, as hopefully readers are already

seeing, I will produce, argue, and substantiate the purpose and framework of the topic; the

definition of major terms; caveats and suggestions for further reading; development of a

practical methodological approach; and a sound rationale for three chapters each having

three attending sections. Each chapter will begin by diagnosing the main character's

manifested existential crisis that will be exemplified directly with a quote from the

particular text. By doing so, especially by first studying the work from the existential

crisis, I will be able to examine the main character's existential inauthenticity in the first

section, the development of his existential authenticity in the second section, and finally,

his existential relation to the African American construct in the last section. The conclusion will sum up what we have accomplished, and it will also consider several salient implications and avenues for further study.

Entitled "Richard Wright's *The Outsider* and African American Existential Authenticity," Chapter One will focus on existentially "inauthentic" and "authentic" constructions of selves that have an impact on the main character's becoming and being an African American. Section One, entitled "A Pseudo *Ubermensch* as a Deified Being of Inauthenticity," will look at the types of "inauthentic" selves produced by the main character's seeking to realize his fanatical freedom through power. That is, through Wright's main character, Cross Damon, I will be able to show that the protagonist suffers from a corrupt sense of freedom that leads him to violence and self-destruction. More specifically, it will show the protagonist's suffering from an existential megalomania that reduces everything to an individual power play that ultimately forces him to sacrifice the only possible opportunity that he has for moving beyond his own preciously pernicious egomania: his love for Eva Blount.

Section Two, on the other hand, will show the main character's coming to an *anagnorisis*, a main recognition, near the end of the novel that allows him to realize the complexity of his existential disease, which in turn allows him to struggle towards the possibility of an existential remedy for his crisis, "The Promise." Finally, Section Three, entitled "Cross's 'Promise' and the African American Racial Construct" will focus mainly on how the main character's inauthenticity and authenticity impact his becoming and being an African American. Specifically, in terms of inauthentically being a pseudo *ubermensch*, someone who seeks power for power's sake, how does it affect the

protagonist's sense of race? When the protagonist finally gives up on becoming an *ubermensch*, how does it alter his sense of race then? Finally, how does his existential remedy, "The Promise" transform his sense of being and becoming an African American?

Each of the three sections in Chapter Two, entitled "Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*: Invisibility and African American Existential Authenticity," will also focus on the dialectical description of "inauthentic" selves offered by several competing existential structures produced from desire. With Ellison's *Invisible Man*, though, I will attempt to show African American existence as a particular structure generated from a visible-invisible binary. In this case, through his anonymous first-person narrator-main character, whom I will occasionally call the Invisible Man, Ellison will show that the whole existential enterprise of producing an I-Self comes from a person creatively putting together individual and social structures as they interact with tangible and intangible desires.

Entitled "The Invisible Man's Inauthentic Non-Individuation," Section One will focus on the main character's attempt to fashion a They-Self. Section Two, entitled "The Invisible Man's Authentic Individuation," will show the main character's coming to an *anagnorisis* that, through infinite possibilities of selves to make and choose from, he is free to be who he wants to be. Finally, Section Three, "The Invisible Man's Visible Invisibilities and the African American Racial Construct," will center on how the existential authenticity and inauthenticity binary affect his sense of being and becoming an African American.

Each of the three sections in Chapter Three, entitled "James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and African American Existential Authenticity," will focus on a

fourteen-year-old's struggle with the structural dialectic of desire that produces inauthentic and authentic selves. In this case, though, I will attempt to account for African American existence from an old existential repository structure of selves: religion, specifically, Christianity. That is, in his *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, Baldwin shifts the emphasis of race from the structure of the socio-political to Christianity as directly experienced by African Americans, who, according to Baldwin's characters in the narrative, see themselves as God's special saints.

In Baldwin's more subtle account of the main character's movements toward existential authenticity, race is also very much a significant part of the real consciousness or spirit of "history," specifically when readers see it portrayed as a process of the Southern migration to the North, which we can witness from multiple narrative points of view. Baldwin's main character, John Grimes, however, will show that he develops his own existential authenticity through a type of personal consciousness of mutual selection, or choice, rather than through a unilateral God dispensing authoritarian unconscious election. For the purpose of this analysis, Section One, entitled "John Grimes's Struggle with Inauthenticity," will focus on the main character's self-condemnation that he is both wicked and sinful. It will reveal that the source of his self-judgment comes from his struggle with his stepfather and his incipient sexuality.

Section Two, entitled, "John Grimes's Transformation into *The Newly Anointed Saint*," will center on the main character's falling onto the threshing floor of his family's church and becoming a newly appointed saint, someone who develops a personal and private relationship with God that allows him to come to a new ethical relationship with himself and humanity. Section Three, entitled "John's Life and the African American

Racial Construct," will focus on the main character's relationship with his being and becoming an inauthentic and authentic person and its effect on his African Americanness. After that, the section will study what and how the main character's actualization impacts his relation to himself and others as African Americans.

The conclusion will summarize, elaborate, and expand on the topic of the dissertation: African American existential heroes: narrative struggle for authenticity. It will recapitulate that the topic applies to three discrete manifestations of existential authenticity as particularly analyzed in the chapters about the narratives themselves. That is, these authors provide us with three separate stories that reveal their protagonists as active agents of existential freedom who realize in their own various ways that freedom tempered and guided by ethics, empathy, and sociability is fundamental to authentically actualizing their particular existences and that race, and life itself, involves a structural dialectic of desire that generates constructs from which individuals can choose to make themselves.

Chapter One: Richard Wright's *The Outsider* and African American Existential Authenticity

Section One: A Pseudo *Ubermensch* as a Deified Being of Inauthenticity

African American existential philosophy is well-enough established now in academia that putting forward another argument for founding or defending it would be very much unnecessary. Where much work is still left for the determined and eager scholar is to continue applying the major African American existential insights to specific texts so we can better understand how individual authors have attempted to make existential cases for their characters in various and varied aesthetic fields (music, dance, literature, etc.).

What I intend to do in the following chapters is to apply the study of African American existentialism to several notable African American novels, specifically from Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin, in order to understand how each individually engages in this philosophical-literary enterprise. What I am especially interested in here, though, through mainly a close reading of the development of the main characters in each work, is the particular philosophical arguments made for African American existence. That is, one can reconceive these narratives as attempts to produce specific arguments for African American existential authenticity.

Moreover, the dissertation takes existential authenticity as fundamental to analyzing each of the authors' arguments for existence since authenticity is existentially prescriptive rather than descriptive. That is, one can study the main characters as paradigms for not just how they lived but what they lived for. In short, one can move the analysis from an *is* to an *ought*, from simple experiential accounts to a study of lived values. Ultimately, by doing so, we can focus on how the authors attempt to "keep it real" with themselves and others in relation to such crucial African American existential issues as freedom, agency, and choice.

If one studies Richard Wright's hero, Cross Damon, from his 1953 novel, *The Outsider*, through the philosophical optic of African American existentialism, the conclusion, after properly co-opting and applying some helpful existential terminology, should be that the main character is a diseased pseudo *ubermensch*: a sickly inauthentic self-deifying superman, who ultimately reaches an epiphanic moment of healthful authenticity at the end of the novel. However, such a melodramatic diagnosis, and outcome, of the main character already implies that the analysis is getting very much ahead of itself. To justify this conclusion, one needs to examine carefully the origin, meaning, and implications of the central diagnosis, pseudo *ubermensch*.

By pseudo *ubermensch*, I am referring to the egregious misnomer that many earlier popular scholars of existentialism had leveled and heaped upon the late 19th century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, who was an existentialist who, they erroneously claimed, had argued for certain future super-capable men who would achieve

a pure and naked will to power. A blatant example of such a scholarly purveyor comes

from a still very popular introduction to existentialism, William Barrett's *Irrational Man*

(1958)*: A Study in Existential Philosophy*. In it, Barrett interprets Nietzsche as arguing

that, even though most contemporary people are not aware of it, they are in deep

existential dread because they have lost their seemingly stabilizing ethical structures as a

result of losing their foundational Judeo-Christian beliefs. Thus, Barrett proposes that

Nietzsche argues that they need a new structure to provide them with new prescriptive

values to live by: "If man has lost this anchor to which he has hitherto been moored,

Nietzsche asks, will he not drift in an infinite void? The only value Nietzsche can set up

to take the place of these highest values that have lost their value for contemporary man

is: Power" (204).

This new value of power that Nietzsche argues for, as Barrett continues to explain,

has already manifested itself thoroughly with contemporary people. We are Nietzscheans

who attempt to wield power as a rude and crude sort of force involving the self's total

control of the mind and body of oneself, others, and the entire natural world. Hence,

Barrett can eschatologically argue, though, again, erroneously with reference to

Nietzsche, that the continued atomic threat is a prominent display of our underlying

Nietzschean striving for absolute power:

> If this moment in Western history is but the fateful outcome of the
> fundamental ways of thought that lie at the very basis of our civilization—
> and particularly of that way of thought that sunders man from nature, sees
> nature as a realm of objects to be mastered and conquered, and *can*
> therefore end only with the exaltation of the will to power—then we have
> to find out how this one-sided and ultimately nihilistic emphasis upon the
> power over things may be corrected. (205)

One need not go into an elaborate defense of Nietzsche here, but it is important to quickly clear his name with reference to the charge that he argues for either a materialistic or nihilistic *ubermensch* pursuit for power philosophy. As Nietzsche points out in his *The Will to Power*, the values promoted by European cultures have severely damaged human instincts to the extent that human beings are now quite ill. What has been the chief culprit? According to Nietzsche, it has been Judeo-Christian religions. In imagining and pursuing a spiritually transcendent realm, humans have lost their earthly vitality. They have become impotent to the exuberance of life, and thus, they have lost their fundamental will to live. According to Nietzsche, the only remedy is to acknowledge the problem and choose to make a transvaluation of values that promotes a healthy state of human instinct, which only a very few can achieve at the highest and rarest level.

Even though the diagnostic phrase pseudo *ubermensch* originates from an egregious misreading of Nietzsche's work, usually with a direct reference to his will to power, the term can still be used productively in this, or any other, analysis for identifying thoughts and actions that express the material and nihilistic power pursuing types. With Cross, for instance, Wright ostensibly produces a main character who seeks nihilistic power over the minds and bodies of himself, others, and the natural world as a super being of "bad faith," or inauthenticity. In short, Wright's *The Outsider* is a story about a man trying desperately to be a god. For that reason, Cross Damon can easily be categorized as a pseudo *ubermensch*.

To directly make the case that Cross is a pseudo *ubermensch*, I will focus on analyzing the salient existential episodes of the novel that reveal the type. To begin, I will approach the narrative near the climax in order to examine Cross's character immediately

before he reaches his *anagnorisis*, or "main recognition of the narrative," which begins

with his interlocuter Ely Houston, the District Attorney of New York, who finally catches

him:

> "Damon, listen to me, just listen and think about what I'm asking and then try to answer . . . This is Houston still talking to you . . . Damon, you were an outsider . . . You know what I mean, don't you? You lived apart . . . Damon, tell me, why did you choose to live that way?"
>
> That damned old curious outlaw? He never forgot anything. He was still on his trail . . . Still hunting him down . . . Sure; he'd tell 'im . . .
>
> "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?"
>
> "Nothing . . ." (585)

The above quote, which comes immediately before the *anagnorisis* near the end of

the novel, reveals the dark and deep abyss of the inauthentic to which Cross has fallen

into in his desperate struggle to actualize his freedom and ultimately become a god. He

has finally, as he succinctly replies to Houston, come to a "Nothing."

This "Nothing" is all that Cross has left after leaving a trail of lies, betrayals, and

bloody corpses from Chicago to New York in his wake. Cross had opportunistically faked

his death in a major train crash; violently separated from his wife; ruthlessly abandoned

his three young children; recklessly impregnated and committed statutory rape with a

seventeen-year-old girl; heartlessly deceived his mother; impulsively murdered a good

friend; willfully murdered a fascist and a communist; sadly violated the trust of his

greatest love, to the extent that she committed suicide when she discovered his

transgressions; and woefully deemed it necessary to continue his crimes against

humanity. Cross has committed all these atrocities. He does this all for the sake of his

fanatical freedom to be a god, and yet, for what? Horribly, it is all for a "Nothing."

From the list of atrocities above that led to Cross's ultimate realization of nihilism,

one can study the horrible deeds Cross committed and assuredly conclude his being

diagnosed as an existentially inauthentic character, or more specifically, a pseudo

ubermensch. From the very same list, however, readers can further question what actually

spawned the kind of pseudo *ubermensch* presented before us. In other words, we can

study what produced and motivated him to become a pseudo *ubermensch*. For that, we

should turn directly to Cross's attempted self-deification, which has to do with his strong

desire to transform himself into a god. To understand that, we should chronologically

examine the major episodes of deification that eventually leads Cross to his "Nothing":

> "Cross," Joe said, "you're losing your touch. Remember the time you used
> to pull them crazy stunts?" Joe turned to the others for confirmation.
> "When Cross first came to work in the Post Office, he was a nonstop riot,
> a real killer-diller. Early in the evening, when the rush hour was on, he
> used to—we were working on the 11th floor then—lift up the window, run
> his hand in his pocket and toss out every cent of silver he had. Just throw it
> all out of the window to the street. And then he'd lean out and watch the
> commotion of all them little antlike folks down there going wild,
> scrambling and scratching and clawing after them few pieces of money
> and then, when the money was all gone, they'd stand looking up to the
> window of the 11th floor with their mouths hanging open like fishes out of
> water. And Cross'd be laughing to beat all hell. And Cross'd say that them
> folks was praying when their faces were turned up like that, waiting for
> more money to fall. Ha-ha!" (6)

Even though the above quote is a simple retrospective anecdote initiated from one

of Cross's bantering friends, it does present Wright's first description of Cross's acting

out his pseudo *ubermensch* desire to be a god. The moment presents all of the clear,

dominant characteristics of the incipient self-deifying personality: physical elevation, the 11th floor, indicating superiority over all those below; figures of speech, the ant and fish metaphors, indicating inferior types of being; provision of means, tossing money from a height, indicating an overseeing providence; the supplicating position, prayer, indicating a deity to petition to by the people below; the emotional outburst, laughter, indicating condescension by the superior person, who is the god above, etc.

It's trite but true. To understand the inception and progression of Cross's pseudo *ubermensch* drive for self-deification, one should start with an existential psychoanalytic approach. What makes the significant distinction here between a traditional psychoanalytic study and an existential one is that the latter focuses on the cognitive development and consequences of one's life choices: "Existential psychologists believe that it's not only important to identify and reduce the symptomatology of mental illnesses, addictions, relationship issues, and other psychological issues, but to go beyond the symptoms, addressing how a person defines meaning, purpose, and a life well lived" (Existential Psychology 1). Specifically, an existential psychoanalytic account of Cross's relationship with his mother and father is helpful in revealing Cross's deep sense of guilt, blame, and abandonment that affects his life as an adult. To readily see this point, consider the following passage:

> They [Cross's father and mother] married a month after they met and his regiment moved northward. She followed, feeling glad that she was giving him her life. But she soon learned that there were other girls foolish enough to look at him through romantic eyes and give him their hearts and bodies too. She finally upbraided him and he was cynical and defiant; then, more to avoid her than from motives of patriotism, he had, after returning from France, joined the army as a regular soldier. She trailed him dismally from army camp to army camp, begging for an understanding. Instead, the gap grew wider. Even before her son was born in 1924, she

knew that she was only in his way, a worrisome wife. It was then that she took her sorrow and her infant son to God in copious tears. A year later she learned that somewhere in the reaches of Harlem, in a dirty, vacant lot at midnight, the police had found him lying wounded. He had been in a drunken street brawl, had lain unconscious in subzero weather, and had died a day later in an army hospital. (28)

The above quote reveals the deeply disturbing psychological trauma that Cross's mother suffered as a result of his father's rejection of her. Later, the narrative will describe how she gets, as they say, religion in order to overcome the pain. Now, believing in a religion does not necessarily beget a pseudo *ubermensch*, but, depending on the religion that informs one's faith, it can provide the ready, malleable psychic material for a child to become one, especially when the mother's resentment against the father uses the particular religion as a means of transferring a vindictiveness onto her child, a point that Wright repeatedly illustrates in his psychological descriptions of both Cross and his mother's relationship:

> She had done it; she had evoked in him that shameful mood of guilt born of desire and fear of desire. He knew that she was not lamenting for him alone, but for her own betrayed maidenhood, for how she had once been so treacherously beguiled into trusting surrender; she was blaming him somehow for its having gone wrong, confusedly seeking his masculine sympathy for her sexually blighted life! Goddamn her! Hadn't she any sense of shame? He imagined himself rising and with a single sweep of his palm slapping her to the floor. And in the same instant a poignant pity for her seized him. Poor, lost, lonely woman clinging for salvation to a son who she knew was as lost as she was. He was too close to her and too far from her; much too warm toward her and much too cold. If only he understood her less! But he was cut off from that; he was anchored in a knowledge that offended him. And this image of his mother's incestuously-tinged longings would linger with him for days and he could curse her for it. (26)

Using the above quote, and the rest of the text in general, readers can see that an existential psychoanalytic study is extremely helpful in understanding Cross's pseudo *ubermensch* drive to be a god: readers can easily see that the drive initially manifests itself from the main character's dysfunctional relationship with his mother and that it worsens as it develops even further on in the novel.

To show its continued development, Wright repeatedly provides readers with examples that reveal Cross's accumulatively acting out as a god with others, especially, with his friends, mistress, wife, and mother. With his friends, Cross reveals a god-like superiority that primarily manifests itself in an aloofness and playful manipulation of them. With his mistress, even though she puts tremendous pressure on him to marry her because of her pregnancy, Cross reveals the need to be in total control. The fact that she is extremely young, which implies his obvious desire to dominate, and worse, the fact that she is illegally underaged and Cross does not know it at the time, suggest a very serious lack of awareness generated by his centripetal egocentric drive to be a god. In his relationship with his ex-wife, Gladys, once again, it is easy to discern Cross's self-deification. His initial attraction to her comes from his need to protect and control her. Later, his frustration and ultimate dissatisfaction with Gladys comes from her contentment with their lives and his frustration with not being able to completely actualize his inner desire to be a god.

If readers were simply to conclude the study of Cross's pseudo *ubermensch* drive as it is expressed in his relationship with other characters by using an existential psychoanalytic approach, they would come up with much in understanding the source and progression of his self-deifying disease in *The Outsider*. However, a more rigorous

existential study requires a deeper understanding that Cross's desire to be a god is a

symptom of a very serious underlying existential illness. To study the illness itself, to go

below the symptom to the disease itself, readers need to recall the very title of Wright's

Book One and its accompanying epigraph--*Dread*: **"**Dread is an alien power which lays

hold of an individual, and yet one cannot tear oneself away, nor has a will to do so; for

one fears what one desires" (1).

From an explication of Wright's epigraph of Kierkegaard, we need to study the

source and, more importantly, the theme of Book One – *Dread*, in order to obtain a better

understanding of Cross as an existential character. Many scholars of existentialism regard

Soren Aabye Kierkegaard as the very first existentialist, as Walter Kaufmann does in his

classic introduction to existential philosophy: *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*,

where he sums up Kierkegaard's introductory bio with the following:

> Soren Kierkegaard was born in Denmark in 1813 and died in 1855.
> Against the theoretical philosophy of Hegel and his predecessors he pitted
> a mode of reflection closer to the individual's concrete existence. He tried
> to live his thoughts-at times grotesquely, as he pictures his own efforts in
> *The Point of View*, but at other times, especially at the end of his life, with
> a complete and utter disregard for his temporal welfare. He died, having
> worn himself out with protests against the perversion of Christianity by
> Christian institutions and refusing the ministrations of his church. (83)

Through his analysis of the Fall of Man, from The Book of Genesis in The Old

Testament, Kierkegaard expounds on the meaning of *dread* in his eponymous work, *The*

Concept of Dread. In his analysis, man is blithely living his life without being conscious

of his existential freedom. This is the case with the first man, Adam. He lives in the

Garden of Eden without a care in the world. Why would he worry? God is the Absolute

Perfect Gardener who watches and tends for everything. What eventually disturbs Adam

out of his existential complacency is God's prohibition: "And the Lord God commanded

the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of the

knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof

thou shalt surely die" (10). God's prohibition throws Adam into a vertigo of self-

consciousness: he feels himself spinning into a spiral of choice and its infinite

possibilities. That is, even though Adam has been choosing from possibilities throughout

his life before God's prohibition, and thus, always exercising his existential freedom, he

was still not aware of it. Adam must now *consciously* choose to choose.

Even though Wright does not provide readers with a main character who starts out

in a state of perfection like Adam (one of the major implications of Kierkegaard's account

of *dread* is that all of the descendants of Fallen Man [Adam] are born in the very midst of

dread), Wright does produce a protagonist that has to make a *conscious* choice during an

existential crisis. Specifically, during the immediate aftermath of a horrible train wreck

that he survives, Cross realizes a tempting option: he can choose to fake his death and

completely free himself, he mistakenly believes, from all the consequences of his actions,

or he can choose to let everyone know he has survived the crash and then face certain

personal and social annihilation:

> 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? It would solve every problem he had if the world and all the
> people who knew him could think of him as dead . . . He felt dizzy as he
> tried to encompass the totality of the idea that had come so suddenly and
> unsought into his mind, for its implications ramified in so many directions

> that he could not grasp them all at once. Was it possible that he could somehow make this false account of his death become real? Could he pull off a thing like that? What did one do in a case like this? These questions made him feel that the world about him held countless dangers; he suddenly felt like a criminal, and he was grateful for the nervous flakes of snow which screened his face from the eyes of passersby. Oh, God . . . He had to sit down somewhere alone and think this thing out; it was too new; too odd, too complicated. How could he let them go on believing that he was dead? (105)

Cross finally chooses to fake his death in order to obtain what he believes to be his freedom. However, his choice is problematic. Yes, he has moved forward as a result of his pivotal decision, but now one needs to consider the type. Kierkegaard was aware of this. Choice for choice's sake is not enough.

For Kierkegaard, the type of choice reveals its quality, or orientation to one's existence, which in turn, indicates one's relationship to life. To elaborate on this point, Kierkegaard wrote *The Three Stages on Life's Way* and *Fear and Trembling* to demonstrate where existential decisions can place one in life. From a low to high continuum, Kierkegaard called them the Aesthetic, the Ethical, and the Religious Stages of Life.

The Aesthetic Stage does not refer to art and beauty. As Kierkegaard explains it, the Aesthetic Stage has to do with making choices from the fundamental values of pleasure and pain. An example of such would be the Don Juan personality, the living of life for wine, women, and romantic intrigue. The Ethical Stage, on the other hand, involves making choices from the fundamental values of good and bad. An example of that person would be a judge, who arbitrates the lives of others through legal criteria. Finally, the Religious Stage involves the fundamental values of faith and doubt as they

pertain to one's personal and private relationship with God. An example is Abraham,

from The Old Testament. Abraham was willing to sacrifice his dear son, Isaac, to prove

his complete fidelity to God. For that reason, traditionally, Abraham is called The Father

of Faith. To reach this final stage, one must choose to take a Leap of Faith, as Abraham

did with his willingness to sacrifice his son, which, surprisingly, means suspending one's

purposeful, or teleological, sense of ethics for God, since He required Abraham to violate

the taboo of filicide, which is the killing of one's own son or daughter. Fortunately for

Abraham, God changed His mind about having Isaac sacrificed, but Abraham was still

willing.

Noting Kierkegaard's *Three Stages of Life*, readers should immediately recognize

that Cross falls under the Aesthetic Stage. Readers should know this because Cross

mainly chooses from the value spectrum of pleasure and pain. Early and often in the

narrative, this orientation to life is emphasized in Cross's desire for sheer physicality, his

"body-for-body's sake" refrain:

> Through the bluish haze of tobacco smoke and amidst the hub of laughter
> coming from the rear of the café, his senses dreamily seized upon woman
> as body of woman, not the girl standing by the steam table, but just woman
> as an image of a body and he drifted toward a state of desire, his
> consciousness stirring vaguely with desire for desire. (31)

We could continue using Kierkegaard's *Three Stages on Life's Way* and *Fear and*

Trembling to conclude that Cross fails to be authentic because he fails to progress from

the Aesthetic Stage to the Ethical and Religious Stages. That is, Wright presents readers

with a character that focuses primarily on constructing himself from a value continuum of

pain and pleasure, which, by a Kierkegaardian account of authenticity, is on the lowly

Aesthetic Stage of Life, which Cross is intuitively aware of: "What was this thing desire that haunted him? It seems that I just desire desire, he told himself. And there's no apparent end or meaning to it . . ." (31).

Even though Wright's *The Outsider* does begin with Kierkegaard's existential worldview, its existential significance hardly ends there. Readers can see this because when we follow the trajectory of the plot-structure, we can readily witness that immediately before the *anagnorisis* Cross concludes with a confession that his life has resulted as a "Nothing." This "Nothing" signals an immediate and complete departure from Kierkegaard's philosophy since it moves away, and, yes, even outside, The Three Stages of Life that Kierkegaard describes. In fact, with Cross's "Nothing," he not only rejects the Aesthetic Stage but also negates the Ethical and the Religious ones. Cross ultimately falls outside them all.

With Wright's rejection of Kierkegaard's worldview, based on Cross's rejection of all Three Stages of Life Theory, readers can also see that Wright also rejects Kierkegaard's account of authenticity. We can readily see that this is the case because Wright's work so strongly corresponds with Kierkegaard's depiction of dread and his Three Stages of Life, which in turn relates to the topic of existential authenticity. Nevertheless, what readers can fundamentally see, with regard to the novel, is that Kierkegaard's account gives us an incomplete picture of the existential. Once we interpret this lack of completion as Wright's rejection of Kierkegaard's version of authenticity, we are then open to examining how Wright rejects Heidegger's and Sartre's iterations so that he can move on to developing his own conception of existential authenticity.

It is obvious that Cross attempts to be authentic in the Heideggerian sense. That is,

Cross consciously examines the structures of his life in the areas of self, family, and society, and he very well understands that they are contingent and that he can freely choose to accept or reject them. In fact, this is Cross's strength. He is highly conscious of his capacity for choice, so ignorance, or a lack of understanding, that the value of these structures comes from him is not an issue here. As he points out to his interlocutors, just to show his deep meditation on values and the construct of race, Cross is deeply aware:

> After many of the restraints have been lifted from the Negro's movements, and after certain psychological inhibitions have been overcome on his part, then the problem of the Negro in American really starts, not only for whites who will have to become acquainted with Negroes, but mainly for Negroes themselves. Perhaps not many Negroes, even, are aware of this today. But time will make them increasingly conscious of it. Once the Negro has won his so-called rights, he is going to be confronted with a truly knotty problem . . . Will he be able to settle down and live the normal, vulgar, day-to-day life of the average white American? Or will he still cling to his sense of outsidedness? For those who can see, this will be a wonderfully strange drama . . . (165)

As the above quote shows, Cross does comprehend what it means to freely choose the structures of his life. So, he is indubitably "conscious," as Heidegger defines an existentially authentic person needs to be. Yet we see that Cross is far from being authentic. Despite his hyper consciousness, he still lies, cheats, and kills all for a "Nothing." The question, then, arises: why does Cross continue to be inauthentic?

Since Cross "consciously chooses" the structures of his life and yet is still existentially inauthentic, it must be that Heidegger's account of authenticity must either be wrong or incomplete. Jean-Paul Sartre would agree with the latter assessment. Sartre knows that it is not enough to "consciously choose" one's life structures in order to be authentic. "Conscious choice" is just the beginning of one's development towards

becoming authentic. Something else is needed to complete it. Sartre puts forward an additional concept for existential authenticity that goes beyond Heidegger's definition. He argues that a person needs to "plan" his life in order to structure it with subjective truth and purpose. More importantly, the "plan" that gives structure and purpose to a person's life does not really become real until it is actualized.

Cross does "consciously choose" to actualize a "plan," as Sartre argues that a person needs to do in order to be authentic. Specifically, Cross's "plan" involves taking advantage of the train wreck: as I have already noted, he can pretend that he died during the crash and free himself from the grip of his ex-wife, his statutory rape problem with his mistress, his terrible reputation at work, and in short, his overall unhappy life. His "plan" also extends beyond the negative to remaking himself. However, again, even though Cross continually actualizes his "plan," it would still be wrong to claim that he is authentic. While actualizing his "plan," Cross still lies, cheats, and, when cornered, even kills all for a "Nothing." Existential authenticity still seems to elude him.

In Heidegger's and Sartre's account of existential authenticity, something has been conspicuously missing. What has been missing is ethics. In his analysis of existential choice in *Once You Go Black*, Robert Reid-Pharr cogently makes the following point: "It should be obvious at this juncture that the goals of this study are not only historical and theoretical but moral and ethical as well" (9). Reid-Pharr's purposeful omission of an explicit argument for the ethical in his existential study does ironically imply the presence of an underlying one. It is what logicians would call an enthymeme, which is a premise so obvious that it need not be stated.

The ethical must be an aspect of the existential prescription because its presence is obviously necessary. One cannot study the existential normative without ethics presenting itself since ethics is necessary for accounting for the values people use for properly guiding and connecting individuals to themselves, others, and the world. Moreover, with the integration of ethics into our existential study, our understanding of existential choice is not only descriptive but necessarily prescriptive. Readers can now readily understand that existentialism is not only concerned with neutrally or objectively observing accounts about good and bad, right and wrong, but also concerned with situated actions that are themselves instances of good and bad, right and wrong.

As a result of his unethical life, we could justifiably label Cross inauthentic. That is obvious too. However, we could also label Cross inauthentic for the following reason: he lacks empathy for others and, ultimately, for himself. In other words, Cross does not attempt to express feelings or emotions as a way of connecting with the sense of self and others, which in turn prevents him from emotionally connecting with himself and others. With reference to the self, we can expand on this point on empathy with Martin Buber's *I and Thou*. In a nutshell, instead of thinking that the self is separate from the other (a divisible *I* and *Thou*), Buber makes the case that to have a self, one's *I* is very much connected to one's *Thou* and vice versa. More importantly, the I-Self is made through his or her relationship with the *Thou*-other so that the *I* and *Thou* are inextricably interrelated to who we are as whole selves: "There is no *I* taken in itself, but only the *I* of the primary word *I-Thou* . . ." (4).

As Buber helps readers understand, Cross lacks a connection with others in terms of having empathy, which in turn separates him from others and, ultimately, himself. The

reason, as already explained, is that Cross is a particular kind of pseudo *ubermensch*: a god. Cross is deifying himself so that he cannot afford to have the empathy needed to relate to mere mortals: "'Damon, you peeled off layer after layer of illusion and make-believe and stripped yourself down to just simply naked desire and you thought that you had gotten hold of the core of reality. And, in a sense, you had. But what does one *do* with desire? Man desires ultimately to be a god . . .'" (565).

A third aspect of authenticity that is missing in Cross's pre-*anagnorisis* character is sociability. As Simone de Beauvoir puts it, "the individual exists with and for others." Cross obviously doesn't exist to do that. To be a deified *ubermensch* requires one to have power that places one outside groups, the masses, or the herd. This negates Cross's ability to form or be a part of any purposeful collective, and he realizes this: "While packing his suitcase, he was struck by an idea. Suppose Gil was right in coercing obedience from others purely on the basis of its strength? What was there, then, to keep an individual from adopting the same policy? Apparently nothing save cunning and ruthlessness" (256). The quote shows the moment when Cross, who has already been evolving towards becoming a god, comprehends that to be a complete one, he must harness absolute power alone.

Since Cross chooses to be an *ubermensch*, one must conclude that his problems with ethics, empathy, and sociability are a result of his choice to be a god. From that conclusion, readers should begin to recognize that Cross's choice affects his ethics, empathy, and sociability, and not the other way around. This recognition is important since it allows for an understanding that choice is still more fundamental than the three attributive aspects of authenticity. It is an important point to make since now that readers

know that Cross's choice to be an *ubermensch* causes his problems, they can now see that existential choice is an important preceding factor whose only ground reveals itself to be freedom.

Nevertheless, Wright does challenge an oversimplification of existentialism: the misconceived notion that simply making a "conscious choice" is itself good enough to make one existentially authentic. Wright, in his narrative work, challenges this simplistic formula by complicating the existential case for Cross. He does make a "conscious choice": he chooses to pretend to have died in a train crash in order to restart his life. However, we readily see that this is a wrong decision for the reason that it lacks a proper ethics, empathy, and sociability.

Up to the *anagnorisis*, Wright produces a main character, Cross, who is existentially inauthentic. Cross is inauthentic because he suffers from what can be diagnosed as a pseudo *ubermensch* disease, the serious ailment that comes from the false belief that one is superior to others as a result of having a greater will to power. Even though the *ubermensch* diagnosis comes from an oversimplified and gross misreading of Nietzsche's works, especially from his *Will to Power,* it is nonetheless a useful term since the world, both the real and the imaginary one, can produce such types. This is true about Cross. Moreover, this particular disease is so potently manifested with him that he wants to turn himself into a god. For that end, in his desperate attempt to deify himself, Cross commits a series of horrendous acts that required him to lie, betray, and eventually, murder many until he could reach his ultimate "Nothing."

Section Two: The Existential Authentic Hero and "The Promise"

Section One focused on "A Pseudo *Ubermensch* as a Deified Being of Inauthenticity." It made the argument that Wright produced a main character, Cross Damon, who, prior to his *anagnorisis*, or main recognition of the novel, in seeking to be a god-man, failed to be a good man because he failed to see that an authentic self requires ethics, empathy, and sociability. To make the case that authenticity requires these three aforementioned existential attributes, or aspects, in its general definition, I analyzed Cross's life based on both Heidegger's and Sartre's classic existential definitions of authenticity. I showed that Cross had fulfilled Heidegger's version, since he had a "consciousness" of the contingent structures of his life, and yet Cross was still inauthentic. I also demonstrated that Cross actualized Sartre's definition of authenticity, since he had a definite "plan" for his life, and yet he was still inauthentic. Then, section one showed that Cross was lacking in ethics, empathy, and sociability. Cross needed these three in order to be authentic, and so the first section ended by arguing that Wright's definition of authenticity required these same three existential attributes to help complete it.

Chapter One, Section Two "The Existential Authentic Hero and 'The Promise'" centers on Wright's affirmative, or positive, argument for existential authenticity. To see this argument through Wright's main character, Cross, readers need to keep in mind that they should interpret his work mainly from a close reading of the plot-structure arc of the narrative that will allow them to identify the main character's *anagnorisis*, the protagonist's main recognition, near the end of a dramatic work:

> "Damon, listen to me, just listen and think about what I'm asking and then try to answer . . . This is Houston still talking to you . . . Damon, you were an outsider . . . You know what I mean, don't you? You lived apart . . . Damon, tell me, why did you choose to live that way?"
>
> That damned old curious outlaw! He never forgot anything. He was still on his trail . . . Still hunting him down . . . Sure; he'd tell 'im . . .
>
> "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?"
>
> "Nothing . . ." He lay very still and summoned all of his strength. "The search can't be done alone," he let his voice issue from a dry throat in which he felt death lurking. "Never alone . . . Alone a man is nothing . . . Man is a promise that he must never break . . ." (585)

I return to this passage because I believe one can justifiably claim that the idea that "'Man is a promise that he must never break'" is the main recognition of the novel. I can further give at least three major reasons why. First, "The Promise," as I will abbreviate it for the rest of the analysis, is a response to the question that Ely Houston, the District Attorney of New York, puts forward to Cross at that very moment of his dying, a question that just so happens to be basically our own: "'Damon, tell me, why did you choose to live that way?'" (584). Cross's response is that he wanted to be free, truly free so that he could gauge his own worth and live his own life based on his own values. Moreover, he loved life. However, as Cross continues to explain, he did not understand what freedom really meant until he reached his moribund condition. This is when he sums up his *ubermensch* life as concluding in "Nothing." In that pithy self-judgment, readers can see that Cross's philosophy of life failed him.

The second reason for making "The Promise" the *anagnorisis* is that it does follow consequentially from his *ubermensch* life. That is, because of his attempt to be a

god, Cross has lost everything, his family, friends, and even the love of his life, Eva. His loss, though, is consequential: he loses them because he wanted to be a god. The final reason we can take "The Promise" to be the *anagnorisis* is that it readily partakes in the existential argument for authenticity. When one studies the above quote philosophically, Wright's narrative does provide a case that challenges the Heideggerian and Sartrean notions of authenticity: Cross has "consciousness" and does have a "plan" for life, a la Heidegger and Sartre respectively, yet he is hardly authentic. As Wright shows readers, Cross needs to connect with himself and others ethically, empathically, and sociably.

Wright's remedy to Cross's inauthentic *ubermensch* disease is realized in his main recognition as "The Promise." From the very beginning of the narrative, the main character's choices have been leading him towards his realization of it. Even though Cross does not explicitly articulate the following definition, readers can readily render the meaning of "The Promise" in the following way: "'The Promise' is the conscious recognition that an individual's plan for life (one's existential blueprint) includes a relationship with himself and others that involves mutual respect for freedom, truth, will, etc., which is based on a shared ethics, empathy, and sociability." It is a definition that Cross had only an inkling of in the beginning of the novel as an inward disturbance:

> Why were some people fated, like Job, to live a never-ending debate between themselves and their sense of what they believed life should be? Why did some hearts feel insulted at being alive, humiliated at the terms of existence? It was as though one felt that one had been promised something and when that promise had not been kept, one felt a sense of loss that made life intolerable; it was as though one was angry, but did not know toward what or whom the anger should be directed; it was as though one felt betrayed, but could never determine the manner of the betrayal. (24)

Even though he had given "The Promise" some thought, at that point, Cross had yet to fully understand its significance. At that point, he was still attempting to overcome the existential dread that was oppressing him. However, the idea of "The Promise" was inchoately there. In fact, "The Promise," ironically, comes up again and again in his heated quarrels with the most important women in his life. With Dot, his mistress, it comes up when she threatens him: "'If you *don't* see me this morning, you'll be *sorry*! You hear! Whatever happens'll be *your* fault! You can't treat me this way! I won't *let* you! You hear! I said I won't *let* you! You made me a promise and I want you to keep it!'" (13).

Wright also hints at "The Promise" in Cross's violation of his marriage vows, when during a wild drunken spree, Cross cheats on his wife, Gladys, with a random woman he brings home:

> As strenuously as he could try, he could never recall clearly as to how he had come to bring the girl home with him and he never saw her after that to inquire. He suspected that he had drunkenly decided to do it after his money had run out; had confused recollections of being ejected from bars for nonpayment of drinks. Before his nonstop carousal, Gladys had tried to reach him by telephoning from the hospital, and worried, she had come home with the baby and a nurse to find Cross unshaven, bleary-eyed and in bed with what Gladys chose to call his "whore". Gladys' reaction had been so savage and intense that she had wept for days, refused food, sat in deep moods of depression. Finally she demanded of Cross despairingly: "Aren't you happy with me?" (70)

By cheating on Gladys, by breaking his marriage vows, Cross is obviously breaking a promise. At this point, what is significant is that he does not feel any obligation to keep any of his promises. He does not feel the push or pull of any ethics or empathy or sociability to keep him in control because there is an underlying sickness in

his violation that he chooses to perpetuate. Once again, Cross suffers from a fundamental dread that affects the relationships he has with himself, others and the world, and instead of choosing to resolve his dread, he intensifies it when he chooses to be an *ubermensch* in search of deification. To see how dread initially infects his promises in general, readers can look back at his mother's reaction to the symptoms of his ailment:

> "Sorry for what?" she railed. "You can't undo what you've done. You've sinned, Cross, and it's to God you must confess with a contrite heart. Even if that girl gets rid of her child, she'll be forever hurt. She'll remember what you promised—"
>
> "But I didn't promise her anything," he protested.
>
> "Oh, stop lying," she said. "You *did*! You promised the way you *acted*. . ."
>
> (24)

Before the death scene, Cross was incapable of producing "The Promise" because he chose not to overcome the dread that stemmed from his father and mother's old toxic relationship, as elaborated in Section One. In sum, his father, a womanizing boozer who joined the army full time after the war to escape his nagging wife, abandoned both his mother and Cross when he was just an infant. What followed was his mother's instilling a deep sense of guilt into Cross through her vindictively perverted version of Christianity that disturbed him to such a degree that he chose to defend himself by wanting to be a godlike superman, or *ubermensch*.

When Cross makes the decision to feign his death and construct a new identity for himself during the immediate aftermath of all the raucous chaos of a train crash in the South Side of Chicago, his distance from realizing "The Promise" increases. That is, when Cross finally chooses to follow his desire for fanatical freedom so that he can

actualize himself as an *ubermensch*, "The Promise" is further pushed away from actualization because the type of god he imagines himself to be requires that he doesn't form any mutual obligations. He can't. As a human being accumulating power to become a god, he does not register anyone or anything above, or over, him to follow. It is an understanding that impels him to interpret beliefs as simply attempts to rationalize exerting power over others:

> It was odd that he had not sensed it before; it had been too simple, too elementary. His mind worked feverishly, analyzing the concept. Here was something more recondite than mere political strategy; it was a life strategy using political methods as its tools . . . Its essence was a voluptuousness, a deep-going sensuality that took cognizance of fundamental human needs and the answers to those needs. It related man to man in a fearfully organic way. To hold absolute power over others, to define what they should love or fear, to decide if they were to live or die and thereby to ravage the whole of their beings—that was a sensuality that made sexual passion look pale by comparison. It was a noneconomic conception of existence. The rewards for those followers who deserved them did not cost one penny; the only price attached to rewards was the abject suffering of some individual victim who was dominated by the recipient of the reward of power . . . No, they were not dumb, these Gils and Hiltons . . . They knew a thing or two about mankind. They had reached far back into history and had dredged up from its black waters the most ancient of all realities: man's desire to be god . . . (267)

As the quote above shows, Cross discerns that the communists have a hierarchical deification life scheme underlying their surface political interactions. However, Cross hardly objects to their deification scheme. Readers can see that he wants to be a god himself. For that reason, the readers should hold his assessment of the communists as highly suspect.

In fact, I believe I can argue that Cross is rationalizing his perception of the communists for three major reasons. First, though we hear Cross relate that he had studied communist history and theory during his college days, he hardly studied them enough to understand the workings of the nonacademic, active communists of that time. How could he really understand the contemporary communist movement as a whole in that way? Second, when he realizes the hierarchical deification life scheme mentioned in the block quote above, Cross was only acquainted with four communists, Sarah, Bob, Eva, and Gil. How could he really understand the entire communist hierarchy based on a brief encounter with just the four of them? Finally, and most importantly, prior to meeting the communists, Cross already had a strong *ubermensch* desire to be a god, and for that reason, one can justly interpret his perception of them as rationalized projections of his own desires. That is, we are justified in saying that Cross wanted to see them as humans attempting to be gods so that he could finally sever himself to do the same.

As is the case with all who attempt to be gods, Cross is seeking power. In that simple sense, he is similar to others who are seeking to deify themselves. However, what makes him highly peculiar from the others, specifically the ones he confronts, Gil, Herndon, Hilton, is that Cross seeks to be the ultimate kind of god. He refuses to follow anyone or anything; Cross is only following Cross. This makes him the most dangerous of the bunch because he is quite aware of how deadly these *ubermenschen* operate, and he is quite willing to surpass them all in their extremities:

> Those few strong men who do not want to be duped, and who are
> stout enough in their hearts to accept a godless world, are quite
> willing, aye, anxious to let the masses of men rest comfortably in
> their warm cocoons of traditional illusions. Men are more easily
> and cheaply governed when they fear ghosts more than guns! The

> real slaves of the Twentieth Century are not those sharecroppers who wince at the stinging swish of a riding boss's whip; the slaves of today are those who are congenitally afraid of the new and the untried, who fall on their knees and break into a deep sweat when confronted with the horrible truth of the uncertain and enigmatic nature of life . . . (485)

As the above quote reveals, Cross sees only a small clutch of strong atheistic men, all whom we can readily label *ubermenschen*, as being truly capable of realizing themselves as gods. It is only they who are willing to take the risk of power and fight against being deceived by the phantoms of the myriad "illusions" of those who already have power. Of course, it is the masses who are possessed by the "illusions" who the *ubermenschen* do not mind deceiving. In fact, these so-called gods prefer the majority to simply follow the phantoms of their fears since it would make them more amenable to their control.

To understand how Cross reaches his "main recognition": "'Man is a promise that he must never break,'" readers need to understand that for most of the narrative he is suffering from an *ubermensch* "disease," which specifically manifests itself as his desire to be a god, and that his recognition comes from experiences that involve his understanding the consequences deriving from this same said disease. The consequences of this sickness involve both Cross's wholesale rejection of his former life, which includes the abandonment of his life during the early 1950s on the South Side of Chicago: his girlfriend, his ex-wife, mother, children, job, friends, and so on, and Cross's tragic failure to establish genuine human connections in his later life in Harlem: Eva, Bob, Ely and so on. As Cross rightly sums up both his rejection and failure, it is all for a

"Nothing," which is itself the ultimate condemnation of his *ubermensch* way of life that heralds the main recognition of his "Promise."

Even though the *ubermensch* disease is a misunderstanding of Nietzsche's philosophy, specifically his will to power, concerning the issue of existential authenticity, one can interpret Wright's novel to include existential concepts associated with Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Sartre. That is, initially, and heuristically, readers can imagine Cross as mainly an amalgamated character coming from the four existential philosophers mentioned who put forward independent arguments on the topic of the authentic individual. Again, even though Wright misreads Nietzsche's argument for the *ubermensch*, or superman, he uses the Nietzschean concept of it to develop Cross as one. Moreover, even though Wright uses Kierkegaard's dread to describe Cross's inner existential conflict without dealing with his view of Christianity, he still takes full advantage of Kierkegaard's notion of dread, which Wright uses to develop Cross's sick psychological state.

Having used major concepts from Nietzsche and Kierkegaard to develop Cross's character, Wright's use of Heidegger and Sartre focuses directly on existential authenticity. Cross, for instance, has a "consciousness" in the Heideggerian sense that he has an awareness from which he chooses from the contingent structures of self, family, society, and so on. In addition, Wright takes full advantage of Sartre's "plan." Readers can see that Wright does this when he makes Cross's main recognition "The Promise," which subsumes the existential concept of producing a "plan."

With his main recognition, "'Man is a promise that he must never break,'" or to condense it, "The Promise," Wright does add to the overall existential argument for

authenticity. Readers can see this when Wright has his main character, Cross, reveal that there must be serious flaws in Heidegger's and Sartre's definition of existential authenticity. That is, Cross does fulfill Heidegger's and Sartre's definitions of authenticity, which they define, respectively, as "consciousness in choosing the contingent structures (family, race, gender, etc.) of one's life" and "having a plan for one's life from which one actualizes" (which I have condensed as "consciousness" and "plan"), and yet Cross still expresses an inauthentic existence. Specifically, with reference to Heidegger's definition of authenticity, Cross has a "consciousness" of the life he has led, but he continues to be unable to live a life that we would call authentic. As pointed out, he continues to lie, cheat, and kill all for a nothing. Moreover, with reference to Sartre, in a moment of decision in an existential crisis, Cross does choose to come up with a "plan" that he actualizes for his life. However, as also pointed out, he again continues his obscene behavior all for a nothing.

With "The Promise" as the main recognition of the narrative, does Wright resolve the problem? Does "The Promise" of X finally give us authenticity Y? The answer is yes, and the reason comes in two parts. The first is that Wright does not completely reject the Heideggerian and Sartrean definitions of authenticity. He includes and expands on them. That is, Wright incorporates both the Heideggerian "consciousness" and the Sartrean "plan" in "The Promise." Readers can see that when Cross makes the claim: "'Man is a promise that he must never break'" (585). So, Wright does understand what Heidegger means by "consciousness" as authenticity. Cross is fully aware of identity, family, community, and society as structures that he can freely choose to accept, modify, or reject.

Moreover, Wright's "The Promise" necessarily incorporates Sartre's definition of authenticity with regard to having a "plan" for constructing a life. That is, when Cross makes the claim that "'Man is a promise that he must never break,'" Cross chooses to exercise a "plan" in at least two Sartrean ways. The first involves recognizing that the "plan" is made in freedom itself. Prior to producing "The Promise," though radically expressed, Cross was consciously actualizing his freedom: "'I wanted to be free . . . To feel what I was worth . . . What living meant to me . . .'" (585)

We can say that Cross is consciously actualizing his freedom because we know he already had it. He was simply unaware of it. Consequently, Cross's act of promulgating "The Promise" expresses an *a priori* freedom, since, as an agent, one is already in an existential condition, or state, of freedom. The second involves consciously articulating a thought-out guiding structure for actualizing one's life. This echoes Sartre's concept of authenticity as a "plan" with regard to taking responsibility for one's existence by producing a conscious structure from which to make one's life. The promulgation of "The Promise" does just that. It expresses the need from the promulgator to realize "The Promise" in order for it to be realized.

In Wright's main recognition, "'Man is a promise that he must never break,'" or, in short, "The Promise," we can see that he is expanding on Heidegger's and Sartre's definitions of authenticity, which he does by adding three necessary existential attributes to it: ethics, empathy, sociability. Wright does so when he shows readers that Cross is inauthentic in his desire to be a god, and now, near the end of the novel, he does so in the affirmative, or positive, with his main recognition, in which Wright gives us reasons that justify having ethics, empathy, and sociability as additional concepts supporting "The

Promise."

As mentioned, Wright's negative argument for ethics in his version of authenticity comes from Cross's *ubermensch* life. Because he sees himself as god, he refuses to be limited by such rules because he is beyond good and evil. The positive argument, however, that ethics is essential to authenticity is itself part of Cross's exposition of the main recognition: "'We must find some way of being good to ourselves.'" (585)**.** In his main recognition during his death confession to Ely Houston, Cross explains that in order for human beings to make a genuine connection with one another they need to establish rules that govern their behavior, which one can readily sum up as ethics.

Readers can also see that in order for Wright's main recognition of existential authenticity to be realizable, "The Promise" must include empathy. Cross comes to this awareness with "The Promise" because he finally comes to the understanding that feelings significantly matter in making persons who they are and that this also requires persons extending feelings from themselves to others and vice versa. To see an example of this in the novel, readers need to go back to the main recognition episode where Cross is explaining the empathic part of "The Promise" to Ely Houston, the New York District Attorney, who wants to understand why Cross lived the way he did: "'Men hate themselves and it makes them hate others.'" It is the very problem of empathy. Feelings must be shared between persons so that they do not become isolated to the point that emotions degenerate into hatred. Actualizing empathy in a positive way can prevent this.

The last of the three, ethics and empathy being the first and second, that completes Wright's argument for existential authenticity involves sociability. "The Promise" reveals that Wright's argument for authenticity turns the outsider, Cross, and all outsiders for that

matter, into willing insiders, or members of society: "'To make a bridge from man to man'" (585). As the quote shows, "The Promise" connects individuals and the collective so that a society can be formed. This is the sociability aspect of "The Promise."

So, Wright does generate an argument for existential authenticity in *The Outsider* with "The Promise": "'Man is a promise that cannot be broken.'" In addition to having Heidegger's "consciousness" and Sartre's "plan" in his version of existential authenticity, Wright adds ethics, empathy, and sociability. Through his main character, Cross, Wright makes the case that authenticity needs three additional existential attributes to help complete it. He does so in two broad ways: First, he makes the case negatively through the *ubermensch*. This was covered extensively in Section One. The second involves the positive argument. The positive argument involves putting forward "The Promise" itself, which Cross makes near the end of the novel, which is analyzed here.

Once readers recognize "The Promise" as Wright's main recognition in *The Outsider,* they can further see that the main character's awareness changes. That is, after the main recognition, readers can see that Cross can both discern and articulate the consequences of living the inauthentic *ubermensch* way he did to the New York District Attorney, Ely Houston:

> "Do you understand what I mean, Damon?" Houston asked softly. "I'm talking about *you*, your life . . . How was it with *you*, Damon?"
>
> His eyes stared bleakly. His effort was supreme; his lips parted; his tongue moved; he cursed that damned ball of seething fire that raged in his chest and managed to get his reluctant breath past it to make words: "It . . . It was . . . horrible . . ." (Wright 572)

As the quote above shows, Cross's main recognition of "The Promise" now gives

him an authentic consciousness, which, in turn, allows him to see and express to The New

York District Attorney, and readers, why he lived the inauthentic *ubermensch* life he had

lived. He can now sum it all up for Ely, and for us: "It . . . It was . . . horrible." This

verdict on his former pseudo *ubermensch* existence reveals the ultimate judgment on the

fundamental weakness of Kierkegaard's, Nietzsche's, Heidegger's, and Sartre's accounts

of existential authenticity. They lack the combined existential attributes of empathy,

ethics, or sociability. For that reason, each of them has the potential to produce a sickly

ubermensch like Cross. Admittedly, though, the verdict that "it was . . . horrible," still

doesn't explain Cross's consciousness enough. For that, one needs to go one quote

further:

> The effort to keep his heavy eyes open was too much and it was not worth trying. He stopped fighting and let his lids droop and darkness soothed him for a moment; once more he struggled grimly to control his lips and tongue, to still that exploding ball of fire that leaped white hot in his chest; then he said in a softly falling, dying whisper:
>
> "All of it . . ."
>
> "But why? *Why*? Try and tell me . . ."
>
> "Because in my heart . . . I'm . . . I felt . . . I'm *innocent* . . . That's what made the horror . . ."
>
> He felt his dull head falling helplessly to one side. Huge black shadows were descending softly down upon him. He took a chest full of air and sighed . . .
>
> He was dead. (586)

As readers can see from the above quote, even as Cross slowly fades away into

death, Ely continues to question Cross about what he means by deeming his life

"horrible." Here one gets Cross's seemingly enigmatic response: he claims that he experienced the "horrible" because he was "innocent." We can only wonder if Ely or readers truly grasp what Cross means by this.

However, since we have studied the source of Cross's *ubermensch* disease as a misinterpretation, and thus a misnomer, of Nietzsche's *ubermensch* from primarily his *Will to Power*, we have background knowledge that allows us to speculate on what Cross really means. Specifically, with "horrible" and "innocent," Cross may be continuing to use a Nietzschean account of the human condition derived from the ancient Greeks that describes a pessimistic world view. One can refer to Nietzsche's account of "The Wisdom of Silenus" from *The Birth of Tragedy* to explain this insight.

Readers can better understand Cross's claim to be *"innocent"* through the context of Nietzsche's "Wisdom of Silenus," particularly through his fall into pessimism that deteriorates into a nihilism. When Cross describes his life as eventuating into a "nothing," Cross becomes a nihilist with regard to his having lost a sense of meaning and purpose. This is what allows him to claim to be "innocent": He is "innocent" because he intended to be and do good or right in a world that would not allow him to be and do so, in a world that, as it is proverbially said, knew him not.

Cross's claim to "innocence" should immediately remind us that it is a reversal of Christ's cry on the cross, where he said, "Forgive them father for they know not what they do." Cross is now on the cross. He is now the crucified one, but readers can see him as a man who knows not what he does, and worse, a man with no father to ask forgiveness from, which is an indication that he is only human, all too human, as Nietzsche would say.

Wright's main recognition of "The Promise," however, does eventually move away from a permanent Nietzschean pessimism-nihilism stance since it allows a person to give meaning, value, and purpose to his or her life. Wright's movement away from the Nietzschean position is expressed in Cross's realization that experience allows for the "if" as possibility so that he can make choices. This implies that one's experience is important to actualize one's freedom, since one still needs to experience options in order to understand them in making particular choices to be free.

Section Two, "The Existential Authentic Hero and 'The Promise,'" focused on Wright's positive argument for African American existential authenticity. The method I used for searching his version of existential authenticity was by using a plot-structure analysis. That is, readers now know that Wright's *The Outsider* emphasized certain experiences that his main character went through as a result of the narrative trajectory that made certain episodes existentially significant. This allowed us to understand that Cross's definition of authenticity comes from his *anagnorisis,* his main recognition, "The Promise": "'Man is a promise that he must never break.'"

Section Three: Cross's "Promise" and Its Relation to the African American Racial Construct

Section One focused on "A Pseudo *Ubermensch* as a Deified Being of Inauthenticity." In it, I made the argument that Wright produced a main character, Cross Damon, who, prior to his main recognition, the *anagnorisis* of the novel, in seeking to be a god-man, failed to be a good man because he failed to see that in addition to needing to choose to be "conscious" of the contingent structures that allow one to have a "plan" for one's life, an existentially authentic self requires having a genuine ethics, empathy, and sociability for oneself and others. On the other hand, Section Two focused on "The Existential Authentic Hero and 'The Promise.'" There I made the argument that Wright produced a main character, Cross, who, near the end of the novel, finally achieved an understanding of existential authenticity through his *anagnorisis*, or main recognition, of "The Promise." In other words, Cross finally realized that in order "to keep it real," that is, to be authentic, one must not only be "conscious" and make a "plan" for one's life, a la Heidegger's and Sartre's definition of existential authenticity respectively, but also be existentially ethical, empathic, and sociable.

In Section Three, I will focus exclusively on "Cross's 'Promise' and the African American Racial Construct." Now that we know what Wright means by existential authenticity, his "Promise," we can concentrate on how the African American racial construct corresponds to his evolving existential account of authenticity in the narrative. To accomplish this goal, I will primarily carry out a close reading of salient passages in the novel that strongly express Cross's views and actions related to the African American racial-racist construct. Moreover, to attempt to firmly grasp what Cross means by African

American, I will follow the development of Cross's pseudo *ubermensch* desire to be a god as it waxes and wanes in the plot-structure of the narrative. Finally, I will relate Cross's "Promise" to the African American racial construct so that I can attempt to extrapolate its impact on the main character's conception of African Americanness.

As I have shown, before Cross's life completely unraveled, he pragmatically negotiated the racial-racist divide that existed in the South Side of Chicago during the early 1950s. In fact, Cross, despite the racial oppression, would have been considered a highly successful African American. He succeeded in living the American Dream: he had a house, a wife, three children, and, at that time, a highly coveted job with the post office. Proverbially, Cross seemed to have had it all.

Even though readers can now see that Cross recognized and dealt with the racial-racist American construct successfully, it does not mean that he did not have to struggle with its many deleterious effects in the novel. There are plenty of examples that show Cross dealing with others acting out on their sense of racial superiority and, yes, even inferiority. Before he married Gladys, for instance, he had to deal with her internalized sense of racial diminution:

> "I hate white people."
> "Why?"
> "They're mean."
> "Did white people ever bother you?"
> "Hell, naw! I wouldn't let 'em," she said belligerently.
> "Then why do you hate 'em?"
> "Cause they're different from me. I don't like 'em even to look at me.
> They make me self-conscious, that's why. Ain't that enough?"

"If you say so, baby. But, listen, I'm not white."

"That's what's so nice about it," she said . . . (Wright 68)

As the quote above shows, as an African American, Cross is quite confident in his ability to deal with issues of race. He even expresses compassion for others who poorly deal with it. For example, in the above quote, readers can see Cross being compassionate with his girlfriend who feels racially inferior. Gladys, who is about to become his wife, insecurely hates whites. More importantly, the above quote shows that Cross does not allow the power of racism to defeat him. That is why he questions Gladys. He wants to know why she feels disempowered by race because he surely does not.

Cross's relationship with the African American racial construct before his separation from Gladys is as a successful racial pragmatist. That is, Cross was highly aware of the unjust American racial-racist construct but accepted it as a given structure that produced obstacles needing to be negotiated. Before his separation from his wife, he did succeed. However, the eventual debilitating complication was that his existential dread did not allow him to make peace with the direction his life was taking. Cross desperately wanted to be free: "All of his life he had been hankering after his personal freedom, and now freedom was knocking at his door, begging him to come out" (107). In his pragmatically, successfully negotiated life in the South Side of Chicago, which encompassed the racial-racist construct, Cross was not free.

It is Cross's dread that instigates his desire for freedom and undermines his negotiated approach towards the given American racial-racist construct. For that reason, Cross destroys all the pacts with the American structures that allowed him to secure a wife, family, home, car, work, and so on, which had distinguished him as a successful

American. However, readers should understand that at this point, at the very beginning of the novel, we are witnessing the existential unraveling of the main character's racial pragmatic approach. Cross has lost it, in both senses of the phrase, and made himself even more vulnerable to white racism, which is supported by the dominant cultural structure:

> "You colored boys get into a lot of trouble on the South Side," Finch gave a superior smile. "You must have a hot time out there every day, hunh?" Cross stiffened. His accepting Finch's sneering at his racial behavior was a kind of compound interest he had to pay on his loan. (Wright 90)

As the above quote reveals, because of the existential dread producing a self-sabotaging of his American Dream, Cross makes himself even more susceptible to racist attacks against him that he had to some degree shielded himself pragmatically from prior to his separation from his wife. Now, racists, like Finch, can condemn him in terms of the American racial-racist construct that allows such affronts, since Cross, according to the same racial structure, is acting out on perceived stereotypical characteristics that already identify him as being a lazy, undependable, and lascivious African American.

We really do not encounter salient passages expressive of the African American racial construct until Cross flees to New York after he opportunistically fakes his death in a train crash on the South Side of Chicago. Fleeing on a train specifically bound to Harlem, Cross meets an unlikely kindred spirit, Ely Houston, a hunchback, who unfortunately just so happens to be The District Attorney of New York City. Engaged in a heady conversation with Ely and a priest on the topic of race, Cross hears Ely excitedly blurt out the following:

> "I'm profoundly interested in the psychological condition of the Negro in this country," Houston said. "Only a few people see and understand the

complexity of this problem. And don't think that my interest is solely political. It's not; it was there long before I ever thought of entering politics." He smiled cryptically and let his eyes wander over the icy landscape flowing past the train's window. "My personal situation in life has given me a vantage point from which I've gained some insight into the problems of other excluded people."

[. . .]

"The way Negroes were transported to this country and sold into slavery, then stripped of their tribal culture and held in bondage; and then allowed, so teasingly and over so long a period of time, to be sucked into our way of life is something which resembles the rise of all men from whatever it was we all came from," Houston said, the smile on his lips playful and knowing. (Wright 163)

In Cross's conversation with Ely, readers finally get a direct example of what Cross thinks about the African American racial construct as a subject. Despite the fact that Cross is suspicious about Ely's intentions, whether Ely is pursuing him because he is on the lam from Chicago, Cross does mostly approve of Ely's account of the African American racial construct. Cross agrees with him that the plight of African Americans comes from how they tragically arrived in America. That is, the psychological condition of the African American comes from how they were brutally brought to American through the Slave Trade that traumatically stripped them of most of their "tribal culture" and, after much time, tempted them with a way of life that only now might permit them to participate in.

Cross also mostly concurs with Ely's expanded speculative view on the future condition of African Americans. As Ely puts it, he knows that the past tragedy of the African American and their present struggles put them in a unique position: they will

have a conscious choice that will come from a "double vision," which Ely acknowledges

requires African Americans having employment and places to live, but which will,

nevertheless, produce a new kind of American:

> "True," Houston said, "But their getting those elementary things is so long
> and drawn out that they must, while they wait, adjust themselves to living
> in a kind of No-Man's Land . . . Now, imagine a man inclined to think, to
> probe, to ask questions. Why, he'd be in a wonderful position to do so,
> would he not, if he were black and lived in America? A dreadful
> objectivity would be forced upon him." (164)

To some degree, Ely does account for the African American racial construct, and

to some degree, he can account for Cross as an outsider. However, I have to emphasize

here that Ely's analysis comes from a simple sociological theory of our topic. By that, I

mean that Ely is applying a scientific framework that theorizes people and society from

detached generalized historical data that cannot account for the *sui generis*, individual

freedom of subjectivity of persons under analysis. For that reason, one can argue, despite

Cross's endorsement of Ely's scientific approach, that there are several major deficiencies

in Ely's analysis.

First, even though he has an ostensible courage to be direct about it, Ely's so-

called scientific description of African Americans treats them as a problem, and that, in

itself, is the real problem. It is a curious point that Du Bois cites when he observes whites

observing him: "All, nevertheless, flutter round it. They approach me in a half-hesitant

sort of way, eye me curiously or compassionately, and then, instead of saying directly,

How does it feel to be a problem? they say, I know an excellent colored man in my town; or

. . ." (37). In other words, Ely, like many others before and after him, unjustifiably

characterize African Americans as a collective burden to be dealt with by those who also implicitly help produce the conundrum of race by privileging themselves as being objective and non-complicit.

Second, Ely's sociological approach is quite limited. As readers now know, or should, most of the social sciences of that time largely ignored the richness of human subjectivity, which makes up most of who we are since it is a significant aspect of our consciousness, if not, some would even argue, all of consciousness itself. Third, Ely's analysis includes an extremely simplistic analogy of race and deformity. The African American condition is far too distinct and complex for it to be compared to deformity, which itself is far too distinct and complex to be compared to African Americanness. Finally, the analysis does not consider African Americans existentially. For that reason, the analysis misses the outlier, the atypical, and the freak. Yes, Cross is an outsider, but, exactly, what kind?

In the above paragraph, I listed four major deficiencies in Ely's thinking about the African American racial construct. I could have listed more. However, the point has been made already: Ely's analysis is severely lacking. By using an African American existential analysis, we can do so much more. We can study Wright's argument for existential authenticity, and we can do so, at this point, by studying how Cross's perspective on the African American racial construct allows us to critique Ely's analysis:

> "I think Mr. Houston's close to the truth," Cross said, pretending a smile, relishing an irony that came from his referring both to his own feelings that maybe Houston was trying to track him down and to the aptness of the man's remarks. "After many of the restraints have been lifted from the Negro's movements, and after certain psychological inhibitions have been overcome on his part, then the problem of the Negro in America really starts, not only for whites who will have to become acquainted with

Negroes, but mainly for Negroes themselves. Perhaps not many Negroes, even, are aware of this today. But time will make them increasingly conscious of it. Once the Negro has won his so-called rights, he is going to be confronted with a truly knotty problem . . . Will he be able to settle down and live the normal, vulgar, day-to-day life of the average white American? Or will he still cling to his sense of outsidedness? For those who can see, this will be a wonderfully strange drama . . ." (165)

I continue to return to this passage since it is crucial to understanding Cross's existential psychology, and in this case, it reveals that Cross is purposely being vague. He wants to tell Ely, a kindred spirit, that he, Cross, is the outsider that he has been looking for. Yet, as a fugitive, he generalizes to avoid being detected. As he states to Ely, African Americans can choose to continue being outsiders in various ways. That is, African Americans can choose to be outsiders as a group to other groups, or they can become outsiders from each other within the same group, or they can even be outsiders to both.

As readers privy to what the main character is thinking, they possess a sense of dramatic irony that allows them to realize the extent of Cross's outsiderness. They know that Cross has chosen to be an outsider from all categories, including racial ones. They also know that even though he wants to express his personal experience of outsiderness to Ely, he cannot because he is still on the run: he has faked his death in a train crash and during his flight has committed murder. So, even though he agrees with Ely's description of African Americans and their possible choice for outsiderness, due to caution, Cross will only minimally do so. Cross will tell Ely what he may become but will not ever tell Ely who he has chosen to be.

Even though Ely and Cross produce a limited view of the African American racial construct through their analysis, they still provide readers with a sense of what they think

it is. Readers know that they think it can be studied using a simple social science approach that can account for the African American racial construct in terms of being a problem with little to no analysis of subjectivities. Moreover, readers know that they think such an analysis is amenable to analogizing with physical and psychological deformities in terms of outsiderness. Finally, readers know that it is limited to describing general categories and not individuals. Yes, it may account for Cross's outsiderness as a result of his being a member of the African American construct, but no, it fails miserably to account for Cross as an individual who chooses to be an *ubermensch*.

Cross is an African American who freely chooses to live in outsiderness. Thus, one can call him an outsider, but he is far from being just a categorical one. This is what Ely initially fails to grasp in his conversation with Cross on their way to Harlem by train, and this, at this point in the narrative, is what Cross himself does not fully understand. Cross is, as the previous analysis in Sections Two and Three put forward, a pseudo *ubermensch* who fundamentally desires to be a god. Cross's choice to be a particular kind of outsider will reveal the limitations of Ely's scientific understanding of outsiderness, that is, the existential understanding that who we are is far different from what we are, which is a key existential insight.

Now that readers know what Ely and Cross think about the African American racial construct itself, we can further intensify the analysis of our study by focusing on how the pseudo *ubermensch* relates to the African American racial construct. First, let's keep in mind that the use of the pseudo *ubermensch* label comes from an intentional misreading of Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophy, specifically his *Will to Power,* where Nietzsche, argues that a new kind of human being is needed to overcome the negative

impact of Western ideologies, or constructs, that have enervated human instincts.

Wright's reading, through his main character, Cross, on the other hand, has distorted, and

one can ever say, perverted Nietzsche's *ubermensch* account by presenting us with a man

who attempts to will his power over people and the material world in a nihilistic way.

As Cross elaborates on Ely's description of the African American racial construct

on the train ride to Harlem, Cross does not anticipate that his *ubermensch* desire to be a

god would manifest itself completely once he settles there. How could he? Initially, he is

not completely aware of the sort of desire he has. To become fully aware of his

ubermensch desire to be a god, as the novel gradually reveals, Cross has to put his

fledgling beliefs into action. In other words, he has to actualize his beliefs in the world so

that he can experience them in becoming himself, the outcome of which Ely so

passionately but nevertheless incompletely points out on the train.

> "I mean this," Houston hastened to explain. "Negroes, as they enter our culture, are going to inherit the problems we have, but with a difference. They are outsiders and they are going to know that they have these problems. They are going to be self-conscious; they are going to be gifted with a double vision, for, being a Negroes, they are going to be both inside and outside of our culture at the same time. Every emotional and cultural convulsion that ever shook the heart and soul of Western man will shake them. Negroes will develop unique and specially defined psychological types. They will become psychological men, like the Jews . . . They will not only be Americans or Negroes; They will be centers of knowing, so to speak . . . The political, social, and psychological consequences of this will be enormous . . ." (164)

As the above quote reveals, in the abstract, Houston does understand the African

American racial construct. However, Cross's pseudo *ubermensch* life will ultimately

show that Ely's understanding of the kind of outsider Cross will become is not just

limited but woefully so. In other words, Ely does unwittingly suggest the limits of his

scientific account when he makes the claim that "Negroes will develop unique and specially defined psychological types." Yes, Cross is "a psychological type" that is "unique and specially defined," but Cross's life will show that it tremendously exceeds Ely's scientific description when the person in question is existentially inauthentic or authentic enough to take advantage of his or her freedom.

When I search for the next salient passage in *The Outsider* that would allow me to directly study Wright's perspective on the African American racial construct through his main character, Cross, I find that a focus on his relationship with Robert (Bob) Hunter, an anonymous train waiter Cross initially bumps into on his fugitive's run to Harlem, is helpful. In other words, Cross's interaction with Bob reveals what he really feels and thinks about being an African American before and after he becomes a fully conscious *ubermensch*. If, for example, we study the incident involving Cross's reaction to Bob's accidentally spilling piping hot coffee on a white passenger on a moving train, we may get a better understanding of Cross's preconscious *ubermensch* sense of racial identity:

> Cross saw the woman's plump, naked elbow describe a tiny, swift arc and collide with the coffee pot as it left the tray. There was a ringing clatter of metal and a brown spout of boiling coffee, emitting a cloud of vapor, splashed over the woman's bare arm and on to her bosom. The waiter's movements froze and the woman leaped to her feet and screamed, her face distorted with fury and pain.

> "Nigger, you're burning me!" she yelled.

> The waiter stood paralyzed, his mouth open. The woman's frantic eyes swept the dining car, then rested upon the table. In one flowing movement, she seized the handle of a silver water pitcher and raised it above her head, her eyes, bulging and her darkly rouged lips curled in pain.

> Cross was on his feet before he knew it and had traversed the aisle and was standing between the woman and the waiter, fronting the woman, blocking her action with his uplifted right hand which still clutched his napkin. The woman sighed and lowered her hand.

"You're not hitting me, nigger," the woman said quietly.

"You're not hitting anybody either," Cross said.

The priest rushed to the side of the woman, put his arm about her, then looked from Cross to the waiter. (158)

In the above waiter-spilling-piping-hot-coffee-on-a-white-passenger incident, Cross, through his quick defense of the black waiter, Bob, shows that he reflexively identifies himself as a member of the African American community. That is, as soon as an immediate case of racial trouble occurs, Cross is on the side of African Americans, which is exactly the point he will make to Ely that white hostility had produced in African Americans a reflexively racial solidarity.

Cross's relationship with the waiter, Bob, reveals another significant aspect of Cross's view on the African American racial construct beyond confirming his point about reflexively racial solidarity being a conditioned response for a group's survival. What it also shows is Cross's intentional separation from African American solidarity as a result of the further development of his *ubermensch* desire. Readers can see this later in the novel when in Harlem, he once again encounters Bob. Readers can see Cross's refusing to join Bob's call to an African American cause because Cross, at this point, as a fully conscious *ubermensch*, does not see himself as a member of any group anymore. Cross has already decided to become a god:

Bob grabbed his head with his hands, sank into a seat; his body began to tremble. He was suffering, a wet rag billowing between the blasts of Sarah and the Party. Cross was unable to look at him; he stared out of the window.

"What are you going to do, Bob?" Cross asked patiently.

"Hell, man. I don't know," Bob sighed.

"What do you want to do?" Cross asked.

Bob's eyes searched Cross's face as though seeking an answer there; he licked his lips and mumbled despairingly:

"I want to organize Negroes—"

"Well, why don't you?"

"You reckon I could do it? Reckon I ought to?" he asked sheepishly.

"You ought to do what you want to do," Cross told him.

Sarah watched Bob with the cold eyes that only a woman can have for her husband. Cross knew that Bob would never win. Bob was too scared to act alone; he had to have a master. The Party had sunk its hold deep in Bob's heart and, if Bob left the Party, he would have to find another . . .

"I'm gonna stick to my own people" he said heavily, his eyes glistening. He had run from one master to another: his race. "That's what I'm gonna do."

"Then, do it, Bob," Cross said. "I'll help you."

"You want to help organize Negroes?" Bob asked eagerly, jumping to his feet.

"No. I want to help *you*," Cross told him in clipped tones. (260)

The above quote shows that even though Cross wants to help Bob individually, Cross has consciously moved away from African American solidarity. The reason is that at this point, Cross is in full blown inauthentic *ubermensch* mode. He is conscious that he wants to be a god, and nothing will hold him back. So, even though Cross has some lingering sympathy for Bob as Bob, that is, as a suffering individual, a point that Cross emphatically makes when he tells Bob that he only wants to help him, Cross still does not want to be a part of anything that does not lead to his own deification.

Once Cross reaches the zenith of his inauthenticity, that is once he fully embraces

his *ubermensch* desire to be a god, he then consequentially rejects all groups requiring his

affiliation. Cross cannot be a member of any group since as a deity, he believes he has

transcended all of them by actualizing himself as a god. That is why he can murder all

who get in his way; Cross has accepted the rationalization of his god desire. As he says,

"This systematizing of the sensual impulses of man to be god must needs be jealous of all

rival systems of sensuality . . ." (269).

More importantly, since Cross's rejection of all groups is directly related to our

analysis on how the main character's inauthenticity impacts his view on race, readers can

see that Cross's acceptance of his *ubermensch* desire to be a god goes beyond his

believing in the solidarity of the African American racial construct. We have already seen

his rejection in action when Cross rejects Bob's proposal to organize African Americans.

We can also note that Cross's particular rejection of the African American construct is a

key itself to understanding Ely's later recognition, which will allow Ely to finally have

some understanding of Cross:

> "But, Damon, you made one fatal mistake. You saw through all the ideologies, pretenses, frauds, but you did not see through *yourself*. 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 what part of a man is that? It is desire . . . Don't you know it? Why didn't you just live a quiet life like all other men? That's the correct way of being godless. Why be restless? Why let desire plague you? Why not conquer it too?"

Houston was questioning Cross in a kind manner, like a brother would

question him.

"Desire? Why does man desire? It's crazy, for it's almost certain that

he'll never get what he desires . . . Is desire not a kind of warning in man

to let him know that he is limited? Is desire in man not a kind of danger

signal of man to himself? Desire is the mad thing, the irrational thing. Damon, you peeled off layer after layer of illusion and make-believe and stripped yourself down to just simple naked desire and you thought that you had gotten hold of the core of reality. And, in a sense, you had. But what does one *do* with desire? Man desires ultimately to be a god . . . Man desires *everything* . . ." (565)

As the quote above shows, Ely finally becomes aware of what Cross has finally become: a sick pseudo *ubermensch* with a fundamental desire to be a god. Ely knows that Cross has rejected as "illusions" all structures that do not express his own will to power for deification. At first, Ely is shocked to see this from Cross, Ely's scientific studies did not prepare him for this, but nevertheless, to some degree, he does eventually push himself to see Cross for Cross. To illustrate Ely's assessment of the depths that Cross had fallen, during his attempt to identify Cross as the man who went missing in a Chicago train crash, he sees Cross reject knowing his co-worker, his wife, and even his children. When Ely finally tells Cross about the death of his mother, Ely notes that Cross did not even flinch:

> "You were so inhuman that I would not have believed it unless I'd seen it. Today many sociologists say that the American Negro, having been stripped of his African tribal culture, has not had time to become completely adjusted to our mores, that the life of the family of the Western World has not had time to sink in, etc. But with you, you are adjusted and more . . . You've grown up and gone beyond our rituals. I knew that you were beyond organized religion, but I didn't suspect that you were already beyond the family. Last night you stood there in my office and committed the greatest and last crime of all. You did not bat your eye when I told you that your mother was dead. It hurt you, yes; I could see it, but you rode it out. Boy, you had killed your mother long, long ago . . . You must have known your mother well, understood her both emotionally and intellectually; and when one can see and weigh one's mother like that, well, she's dead to one . . . And when you saw those fine sons of yours!

> They tugged at your heart and memory and you were wildly angry and ashamed; but you rode out that too; you overcame it . . . And I said to myself: 'This man *could* have killed Blount, Herndon, and Hilton . . . Only *he* could have done it. He has the emotional capacity—or *lack* of it!—to do it.'" (562)

As readers can see in the above quote, Ely has finally identified Cross's *ubermensch* illness. Cross agrees with the diagnosis. We also agree. For that reason, in relation to the African American racial construct, we are even more convinced that he has rejected it as a result of his *ubermensch* disease to become a god. For Cross, the African American racial construct is an illusion that can be transcended only if one has the will to power to produce that kind of personal apotheosis.

Readers can also see that Ely's discovery of who Cross really is is also the proverbial beginning of the end for Cross's personal *ubermensch* crusade that will, once again, impact his relation to the African American racial construct. This is not only because Cross has been discovered to be an *ubermensch*. It is also because Cross realizes both the failure of being one and the force of the authenticating "Promise." He now knows that an *ubermensch* who attempts to be a god will ultimately arrive at a terminus of "nothing." It is on the road towards his "nothing" that Cross discarded the African American racial construct as an illusion.

On the other hand, Cross's "Promise," as detailed in Section Two, offers a new definition of existential authenticity that refines and expands on the classic definitions of authenticity. It includes Heidegger's definition of authenticity based on a "consciousness" of life constructs, it incorporates Sartre's definition of authenticity as a freedom with a "plan" for actualization and it adds the existential attributes, or aspects, of ethics,

empathy, and sociability into the definition of authenticity that Cross finally realizes he needs to have.

Cross's "Promise" may include the African American racial construct. I emphasize *may* because all I can do is speculate about it since the main character does not explicitly expound on the African American racial construct in his *anagnorisis*. However, if we keep the significance of "The Promise" in mind and if we imagine Cross to be consistent with his recognition had he continued to live, we should not have any difficulties in conceiving Cross's including the African American racial construct as part of "The Promise" itself for three significant reasons.

First, in giving up his pseudo *ubermensch* desire to be a god, Cross abandons a crude and erroneous iteration of the will to power that gives reality only to structures of power that deems illusory all those that lack it. With "The Promise," though, the African American racial structure can become real since "The Promise" allows structures to become real. Second, Cross's conception of "The Promise" may allow him to realize that the African American racial construct is itself a "gifted Promise." That is, Cross may come to understand that certain constructs such as the African American racial one can be embraced as a positive inheritance from our predecessors, or ancestors, if you will. Finally, the newly recognized attributes of existential authenticity may allow Cross to understand that the African American racial construct involves choosing it based on the ethics, empathy, and sociability that can produce an authentic self.

In this section, we have analyzed Wright's *The Outsider* through the thesis: "Cross's 'Promise' and the African American Racial Construct." Readers should see that what generates the evolution of "The Promise" is the inauthentic-authentic binary

functioning dialectically in the novel that, in turn, impacts Cross's subjective valuation of the African American racial construct. In his inauthenticity, we mainly see that he pragmatically accommodates himself to society's prevailing racial-racist structuring.

However, when Cross reaches the peak of his inauthenticity, his pseudo *ubermensch* drive to be a god has him reject the solidarity of the African American racial construct in order to transcend it in his personal pursuit of an apotheosis. When Cross finally reaches the *anagnorisis* of the novel, the impact of his understanding is twofold. First, he realizes that he was grossly in error concerning his *ubermensch* desire to be a god. It ultimately leads him to "nothing." Second, what he comes up with is "The Promise," which expands on Heidegger's "consciousness" and Sartres's "plan" by adding the existential attributes of ethics, empathy, and sociability to the definition of authenticity.

Chapter Two: Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*: Invisibility and African American Existential Authenticity

Section One: The Invisible Man's Inauthentic Non-Individuation

To initiate the study of *African American Existential Heroes: Narrative Struggles for Authenticity,* Chapter One focused exclusively on Richard Wright's main character, Cross Damon, from *The Outsider*, in order to reveal Wright's existential argument that the main character ultimately came to an *anagnorisis*, or main recognition, of authenticity through a long and laborious struggle with existential inauthenticity. Particularly, in his inauthenticity, I diagnosed Cross as suffering from being a pseudo *ubermensch*, an existential disease that may involve someone attempting to become a god as a result of not being able to deal with his or her dread, or fear, of one's absolute freedom to choose. Ultimately, near the end of the novel, with the aid of the existential attributes of empathy, ethics, and sociability, Cross would finally realize his freedom through "The Promise," which is the understanding that "in freedom, one must consciously choose to actualize one's life plan."

Each of the three sections of Chapter One dealt separately with major aspects of Cross's authenticity and its impact on his sense of being and becoming an African American. Section One focused on the origin, meaning, and implications of Cross's inauthenticity, specifically with reference to his pseudo *ubermensch* disease. Section Two, on the other hand, focused on how Cross produced "The Promise," his own existential philosophy for living authentically. To understand how, I first noted that Cross had actualized the classic existential definitions of authenticity from Heidegger and

Sartre, "having a consciousness allowing one to choose the structures of one's life" and "having a plan to actualize for one's life" respectively, and yet the main character failed to be authentic. I also noted, through Cross's experience in the narrative, that Wright extended the definition of authenticity significantly to include empathy, ethics, and sociability.

Finally, in Section Three, I presented an analysis of Cross's existential development from the inauthentic to the authentic and how it impacted his sense of being an African American. I showed that Cross's pseudo *ubermensch* desire for power deeply affected his sense of the African American racial construct as a result of his motivation to transcend it as a god. Moreover, because Cross died immediately after he articulated "The Promise," I speculated that had he lived, it would have more than likely coaxed him into embracing the African American racial construct, since by considering it ethically, empathically, and sociably, it would have allowed him to understand that African American identity could and should be accepted as a gift.

With reference to the thesis, *African American Existential Heroes: Narrative Struggles for Authenticity*, I also want to make the case for the development of existential authenticity in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. To do so, each of the three sections in Chapter Two will also center on the inauthenticity-authenticity binary and its impact on the anonymous first-person narrator-main character's experience with becoming and being an African American. Section One, "The Invisible Man's Inauthentic Non-Individuation," will mainly focus on understanding that there are many types of invisibilities in *Invisible Man*. However, through his lack of making an existential choice that could integrate an independent sense of self, readers will see that the anonymous

main character's primary invisibility is itself an existential inauthenticity that comes from the problem of self-making.

Readers will see that this invisibility of the self, whose concretization is metaphorically presented in the novel as eyes, a face, and a voice, reveals the main character's deep dread and despair of not choosing to choose to make a self. Moreover, readers will follow the development of the main character's existential experience in order to see whether the main character meets the classic Heideggerian and Sartrean definitions of existential authenticity. If he does, or does not, I will attempt to account for how he succeeds, or fails, to meet their definitions so that I can attempt to reveal whether Ellison puts forward any new existential values, or attributes, that the main character should have that would allow him to be authentic.

Section Two, on the other hand, will focus on "The Invisible Man's Authentic Individuation." In this section, through his *anagnorisis*, the protagonist's main recognition, I will focus on Ellison's positive, or affirmative, argument for authenticity. Readers will see the main character finally coming to grips with understanding that in terms of constructing the self and others, visibility and invisibility operate on a dialectical spectrum, which Ellison describes as a "frequency." To come to that understanding, readers will witness the main character existentially concretizing, or actualizing, himself. That is, the main character will realize the importance of consciously choosing to choose to make himself, and thus, he will create, metaphorically speaking, eyes, a face, and a voice for himself. Once he does that, it will show whether Ellison incorporates

Heidegger's and Sartre's definitions of authenticity to his own. It will also show whether Ellison contributes new values, or attributes, to the classic concepts of existential authenticity.

Finally, in Section Three, I will present "The Invisible Man's Visible Invisibilities and the African American Racial Construct." In this last section, I will analyze how Cross's development from the existentially inauthentic to the authentic impacts the main character's sense of being an African American. For that purpose, I will study how existential individuation affects Cross's realization of the facticity, or brute facts, of his life, and his subjective truth, Kierkegaard's phrase for the kind of truth one makes consciously, pertaining to the African American racial construct of his life.

Studying Ralph Ellison's hero, the anonymous main character, from his novel, *Invisible Man* (1952), through the philosophic optic of African American existentialism, I conclude, after properly co-opting much helpful existential terminology, that the main character is mainly a diseased inauthentic non-individuated young man who eventually becomes "The Individual," a term adapted from Kierkegaard. That is, the main character is a sickly unconscious being who ultimately reaches an epiphanic moment of healthful authenticity during the end of the novel. However, once again, such a melodramatic diagnosis, and outcome, of the main character implies that the analysis has already gotten very much ahead of itself. To justify the conclusion, we need to carefully examine the origin, meaning, and major implications of the central diagnosis, that the main character suffers from an existential inauthentic non-individuated invisibility.

To understand the central diagnosis of our main character, that initially in the novel he is a sickly inauthentic non-individuated invisible man, we need to make sure that

we are not misled by him in the Prologue, which requires our not getting lost in the rich, obscuring thicket of Ellison's polytropic narrative so that we can rightly focus on his primary trope—the invisibility of the self:

> Nor is my invisibility exactly a matter of a biochemical accident to my epidermis. That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. A matter of the construction of their inner eyes, those eyes with which they look through their physical eyes upon reality. I am not complaining, nor am I protesting either. It is sometimes advantageous to be unseen, although it is most often rather wearing on the nerves. Then too, you're constantly being bumped against by those of poor vision. Or again, you often doubt if you really exist. You wonder whether you aren't simply a phantom in other people's minds. Say, a figure in a nightmare which the sleeper tries with all his strength to destroy. It's when you feel like this that, out of resentment, you begin to bump people back. And, let me confess, you feel that way most of the time. You ache with the need to convince yourself that you do exist in the real world, that you're a part of all the sound and anguish, and you strike out with your fists, you curse and you swear to make them recognize you. And, alas, it's seldom successful. (3)

It is important to keep in mind that if one does not consider the above quote in the proper disambiguating perspective of the entire novel, what the main character claims about his invisibility can be highly misleading. Readers may incorrectly interpret his invisibility in the above block quote as only coming from others who do not see him. However, we should know, having analyzed the entire narrative, that his invisibility is much more primal than what the main character claims it to be in the Prologue.

To truly understand the origin of the main character's inauthenticity as expressed as invisibility of the self, I will need to focus on the fact that in Chapter One the main character, just freshly out of high school, is a young man who is about to present a speech to eminently formidable figures of his home town so that he can, hopefully, get a

scholarship to go to college. So not only does he have the pressure of performing well to his hometown dignitaries, he also suffers from the stress of possibly leaving home. This requires that the main character suffer through all the proverbial anxieties: disorientation, loneliness, fear of separation, and so on. More importantly, turning from the young-man-leaving-home-for-the-first-time theme, to a deeper existential description of its effect on the formation of the self, we know that the main character has quite the fragile self: he is young, innocent, and provincial and, consequently, has yet to venture out into the world. This implies that he does not have enough of a significant understanding of himself to choose to be visible to himself. In other words, we can see that the main character's primary invisibility comes from a lack of an independent self to perceive.

As most philosophical accounts on existential self-making will state, in time, a typical youth develops a sense of a self through his or her conformity to convention or tradition, which Heidegger describes as being a member of the *They*, or as others label it, having a They-Self, a person who unconsciously makes a self mainly as being a part of the inauthentic crowd called society. However, what more than likely thwarts the main character from developing an unconsciously complacent They-Self is the trauma he experienced at his dying grandfather's bedside.

> He was an odd old guy, my grandfather, and I am told I take after him. It was he who caused the trouble. On his deathbed he called my father to him and said, "Son, after I'm gone I want you to keep up the good fight. I never told you, but our life is a war and I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy's country ever since I give up my gun back in the Reconstruction. Live with your head in the lion's mouth. I want you to overcome 'em with yeses and, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open." They thought the old man had gone out of his mind. He had been the meekest of men. The younger children were rushed from the room, the shades drawn and the flame of the lamp turned so low that it sputtered on

the wick like the old man's breathing. "Learn it to the younguns," he whispered fiercely; then he died. (16)

When the youthful main character cannot figure out the meaning of what his grandfather said at his deathbed, not only does it shake him deeply enough to ask himself why he can't, but it also produces an inner crisis of consciousness requiring him to search deeply, though initially misleadingly, for the nature and character of his own particular self:

It had a tremendous effect upon me, however. I could never be sure of what he meant. Grandfather had been a quiet old man who never made any trouble, yet on his deathbed he had called himself a traitor and a spy, and he had spoken of his meekness as a dangerous activity. It became a constant puzzle which lay unanswered in the back of my mind. And whenever things went well for me I remembered my grandfather and felt guilty and uncomfortable. It was as though I was carrying out his advice in spite of myself. And to make it worse, everyone loved me for it. I was praised by the most lily-white men of the town. I was considered an example of desirable conduct--just as my grandfather had been. And what puzzled me was that the old man had defined it as *treachery*. (17)

The above quote reveals the deep existential trauma that the main character received to his youthful complacent sense of a They-Self as a result of his grandfather's dying words. His grandfather has now made him hyper self-conscious to the point where he is forced to minutely scrutinize the very fragile life given values and structures that make him, him. This produces the quintessential existential crisis that forces the main character to ask himself, "Who am I?" and "What is my purpose?"

Consequently, this existential crisis of a They-Self prompts our main character's need to consciously choose to choose to be a self of his own making, which existentialists

call an I-Self. In other words, one's chosen values are necessary aspects of what makes an

authentic self. When the false security of unchosen values and structures are undermined

or damaged, that is, when a person does not consciously select or maintain one's grasp on

those structure or values, the very sense of a stable self can be severely impaired or lost.

For the affected, this may produce a desperate search and struggle for a partial or total

reliance on traditional or conventional structures to take over and fill in for an ever-

expanding vacuum of an empty self. Unfortunately, the affected cannot remove or fill the

anxiety of inauthenticity that produces the existential crisis of emptiness with a return to

tradition or convention. In extreme cases, as Nietzsche points out, the affected person can

precipitously fall into the abyss of nihilism, which can mean more than just losing some

sort of objective meaning, for it also can denote lacking the subjective structures and

values that make living purposeful.

As mentioned, there are multiple kinds of invisibilities in Ellison's *Invisible Man*,

but the primary one, as hopefully I have shown, is the protagonist's invisibility to himself.

In other words, the main character is primarily invisible to himself because he is not

"conscious" in the Heideggerian sense of choosing to choose to produce his own

structural sense of an independent self (an I-Self). Readers can take this to be the initial

case as a result of the existential trauma produced by his grandfather's dying words. For

the sake of simplicity, in relation to the continued analysis of the main character's

existential inauthenticity, I can now describe invisibility as a lack of existential

"consciousness" from without and within.

An example of external invisibility is when the other does not see you. In that

case, it's his or her inner eyes, not yours, that are the problem. The main character readily

gives us an example of that when he says, "I am an invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me" (3). In this case, a lack of awareness from others prevents them from comprehending him, and in that particular sense, they cannot see him. On the other hand, an example of internal invisibility is when one cannot see oneself. As already demonstrated, this is the case with the main character's primary invisibility. He has yet to develop an independent self to see himself because he has not yet chosen to make an I-Self. The bottom line, with internal invisibility, it is one's own inner eyes, not the others, that are the main source of the problem. Of course, one can compound these invisibilities so that one can be both internally and externally invisible in the sense that one can be blind to oneself and others. Moreover, from the main character and others, readers can see the complexity of internal and external invisibilities become even more particular and complicated with regard to race, class, gender, and so on.

To understand the main character's invisibility more precisely, that is, to understand exactly what one means when one says that he initially lacks an existential "consciousness" to produce an authentic self, one needs to put forward the critical existential distinction that the self has no essence, or nature, which the dominant essential position claims, and that the subject needs to make a self. To put it in philosophical terms, as Sartre states in his *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, the self is not an *en-soi*, or "being-in-itself" (which one can roughly describe as an objective, or physical entity, as a rock or stone). On the other hand, the self is a *pour-soi*, or "being-for-itself," (which one can roughly describe as equivalent to what we call mind or consciousness). As a result of a self not being a physical thing, a person must choose to make a self by way of his or her subjectivity. According to Sartre, this means that even though one's facticity (the brute

extrinsic details about a person, i.e., one's time and place of birth, one's body, one's

parents, etc.) is a given, one has a *pour-soi* with a desire for self-making, which requires

conscious deliberation and actualization.

Sartre's account of *pour-soi*, as explained above, helps readers to understand that

the main problem with Ellison's anonymous first-person main character is that he is

primarily invisible to himself because he is not aware that the self (the I-Self) is not a

thing, like a rock, a tree, or bird, and that he needs to choose to make a self from his

consciousness (his subjectivity). Thus, he cannot see himself because he has not chosen to

become an I-Self for himself. As mentioned in the beginning of this section, concerning

self-making, a youth typically conforms to tradition or culture, as Heidegger points out

with his account concerning the They-Self. However, as a result of his grandfather's

dying last words, the main character cannot be existentially complacent about the self. He

cannot be just a They-Self anymore because his grandfather has undermined that kind of

self by cursing it to its very foundations (the structures and values of his contemporary

traditions and conventions) that could prop the main character up as a They-Self.

Thus, even though he may not be able to articulate this I-Self desire to himself or

to others, the main character is thrown into a deep despair, an intense and indistinct fear,

since he is anxiously in search of a no *thing* self. A salient passage expressing this point

occurs in the novel when the main character, in broad daylight, is eating yams out in the

open streets of Harlem. Despite the negative racial stereotype prohibiting him from doing

so, the main character actualizes and accepts his consumption as part of his I-Self

experience, which is, as he says, his "birthmark." "I yam what I am!" (266).

Unfortunately, his self-emancipating promulgation that might have led to further significant self-making is lost when he joins the Brotherhood, an organization requiring that the I-Self be sacrificed for its so-called real collective cause.

In terms of the classic definitions of existential authenticity, the main character's problem with self-making and invisibility reveals underlying problems with Heideggerian "consciousness" and the Sartrean "plan." Readers can see that this is the case when they consider each of the existential philosophers' definitions of authenticity and relate them to the main character's experience. Heideggerian "consciousness" is defined, in short, "as an awareness and acceptance of the structures of one's life." As we can also see, earlier on in the narrative, when we attempt to gauge the main character's existential "consciousness," we see that he lacks it. The main character is not aware that he needs to choose to make a self from life structures. Moreover, what follows from his failure to have an existential "consciousness" is his failure to realize the Sartrean version of authenticity. That is, since Sartre's "plan" is defined, in short, as "an awareness of life requiring a resolution and actualization," the main character will fail to register it since an existential "plan" requires a preceding "consciousness" for it to be realizable.

Despite the fact that Ellison's *Invisible Man* is highly polytropic, that is, that his novel is filled with all sorts of figures of speech, rhetorical patterns, and complex allusions, readers can still discern a clear and distinct sense of the existential project in his work when they note that one can outline self-making through the author's metaphorical reference to key parts of the body traditionally associated with producing a self. More specifically, one can limn on the main character's progression towards existential authenticity through Ellison's analogical use of the main character's development of his

face, eyes, and voice. To see this point, one can note the main character's struggle with

face-making when he reminisces about a lecture on the subject of race making at the

Founder's College:

> "Stephen's problem, like ours, was not actually one of creating the uncreated conscience of his race, but of creating the *uncreated features of his face*. Our task is that of making ourselves individuals. The conscience of a race is the gift of its individuals who see, evaluate, record . . . We create the race by creating ourselves and then to our great astonishment we will have created something far more important: We will have created a culture. Why waste time creating a conscience for something that doesn't exist? For, you see, blood and skin do not think!" (354)

As the above quote shows, the main character, ironically, can recite from James

Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* the need for existential face-making,

which is a metaphorical expression of self-making since it involves the *conscience*

development of oneself in two senses: in the sense of having an "awareness," which

immediately corresponds to Heidegger's use of being "conscious," and in the sense of

having to choose to be "moral or ethical," which itself immediately corresponds to

Sartre's and Reid-Pharr's philosophical observation that the existential venture is itself

necessarily a project involving prescriptive values. However, at this point, the anonymous

main character does not understand what he is uttering. He needs to grasp that "Stephen's

problem" is very much his own. That is, he needs to take responsibility for making

himself an "Individual," or I-Self: a person who is *conscience* of his freedom to choose

and actualize who he wants to be and become. What would follow is the very creation of

himself that would itself establish a race and a culture.

Even though the main character is not initially aware of his own existential

development, it is important to keep in mind that, in metaphor, one can still discern his

self-making as a process involving mainly three integral, recursive, and evolving parts expressing existential concretization, or actualization. The first, face-making, readers have witnessed and studied in the previous paragraph. Readers can see that it involves a preceding self-consciousness of self-making that ultimately leads to a racial collective consciousness, which the main character has yet to grasp when he quotes Joyce.

The eye, though, is the central initiating metaphor of the narrative. The eye is the classic symbol of awareness, or consciousness, and it readily functions to make the case that consciousness is the primary problem that the main character has: initially, he cannot see himself because he has not yet consciously chosen to make a substantial independent self (I-Self) that he can perceive. It is what makes him and others invisible. Moreover, the eye puns with the first person singular nominative case *I* that is strongly associated with a self. That is, the eye-I pun reinforces the same idea of the relationship between consciousness-self.

Finally, having a voice functions as an important aspect of self-making too. It is no accident that the Prologue and Epilogue introduce and conclude the twenty-five chapters of the novel since etymologically both *prologue* and *epilogue* have *logue* in them, which ultimately comes from the Greek *logos*, which basically means "word" that can semantically extend to mean "speech," which corresponds to what I mean by voice. When one adds the prefixes *pro*, meaning "ahead or in front" and *epi*, meaning "in addition" to the root term *logos*, one should appreciate the significance of voice in Ellison's work, since it marks the beginning and end of the main character's speech self-making.

It is also no accident that the main character is the narrator, since he directly gives voice to what he learns about invisibility, which itself is verbalized in his recognition, "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you," a voice that speaks from and for the *I* and the *you*, which echoes the entire text that begins with an *I* and ends with a *you*. The main character's recognition, in turn, comes partly from his understanding that he is the individual who can speak about invisibility because he has gone through it himself. It is no accident that the main character was (and is) an orator. He was an orator for the Brotherhood who knew he was talented enough in that area. What they did not know was that his ability to be a speaker came from a deep dialogue he was having with himself about himself and others.

For the main character, the problem of self-making leads to the even more particular problem of actualizing himself as an individual, which is more specific than self-making since fashioning a self as an I-Self requires the realization of hierarchical values. Kierkegaard, whose classic epithet is "The Individual," wrote extensively on the subject in his prodigious existential oeuvre. To aid me in my study of Ellison's main character, specifically with his struggles to become an individual, I can, as I did in Chapter One, Section One, focus exclusively on Kierkegaard's *The Three Stages on Life's Way* and *Fear and Trembling*. Kierkegaard's two works refer to the three types of human lives lived based on the particular values that persons can primarily actualize, which Kierkegaard categorized as the Aesthetic, Ethical, and Religious Stages of Life.

Kierkegaard's take on the three life stages allows readers to understand self-making in terms of hierarchical values, which culminate in what transforms a person into

"The Individual." As Kierkegaard elaborates, the Aesthetic Stage, whose exemplar is Don Juan, involves actualizing the values of hedonism, or pleasure seeking. Don Juan is the model for this because he values living a voluptuary life. Unfortunately, such a person is not really free from continually pursuing stimulating sensations since he or she is trapped in sensory desire, which may even lead to suicide as a result of a tedious recycling of finite pleasures. What is worse, for those who experience an inkling of something greater than just the pleasurable, aesthetes may develop a sense of despair. They may do so in two ways. First, because aesthetes follow their own particular pleasures, they cannot properly integrate with groups of people, communities, or societies. In the pursuit of their pleasures, they are alone. Second, because aesthetes do not have prescriptive values to guide them, in other words they lack ethics, they really do not form selves beyond their simple animalistic desires. In this sense, they are not truly independent selves.

On the other hand, the Ethical Stage, whose exemplar is Judge Wilhelm, involves someone who actualizes the values of a just society. A judge is a perfect example of a person who actualizes being in the Ethical Stage because he lives a life determining good and bad for himself and others. Such a person lives a life that Kierkegaard calls the "universal," which involves having prescriptive values applying to all. In this way, the ethical person has a self that is socially constructed. For that reason, one can say that the Ethical Stage makes a person into a They-Self, a la Heidegger's description of possible selves. The problem, though, is that such a self is highly dependent on others. For that reason, in the Ethical Stage, a person is not an individual in the existential sense: in that stage, he or she cannot be an I-Self

However, as Kierkegaard further expounds in his *Fear and Trembling*, God can require that one commit an action that deviates from society's conception of good and bad. The Old Testament's account of God's request of Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac, is a scandalous example of that. Obviously, a sacrifice that entails a father's committing filicide opposes what is good for the "universal," or society. This movement away from the Ethical Stage to a more direct and private relationship with God is the Religious Stage. This Stage, whose exemplar is Abraham, involves embracing the value of faith. It is Abraham's faith that gives him the strength to believe in God and to attempt to sacrifice his son, Isaac. Even though God would replace Isaac's sacrifice with a ram, Abraham was still willing to do it because of his faith. To have such a faith in God, to trust in Him to such an extreme degree, requires what Kierkegaard calls "taking the Leap of Faith," which one can only do alone. Such a person who does so becomes "The Individual."

If I use Kierkegaard's *Three Stages on Life's Way* and *Fear and Trembling* to analyze the specifics of the main character's inauthenticity, I am forced to categorize him as initially being in the first stage, the Aesthetic. That is, in the Aesthetic Stage, the main character wants to form himself through the primary value of hedonism. By calling him a hedonist, I do not mean that the main character wants to experience extreme pleasure: wine, women, and romantic intrigue. Instead, he simply wants to please both himself and others by being successful. However, the main character will move from the Aesthetic to the Ethical Stage when he joins the Brotherhood. When he becomes a member of the Brotherhood, a communist organization, he has moved onto the Ethical Stage that

involves valuing right and wrong at the social level, which does not recognize the

personal or individual.

It is through the main character's experience of the Ethical Stage that he realizes

how the Brotherhood sacrifices *I-Selves* for its purpose. He comes to realize this when he

leads Tod Clifton's funeral procession without the Brotherhood's permission and when he

defends his actions by declaring that it was based on his own personal responsibility. As

Brother Jack, one of the leading Brothers, tells him, he must give up the I-Self for the

collective:

> "You'll learn," he said. "You'll learn and you'll surrender yourself to it
> even under such conditions. *Especially* under such conditions; that's its
> value. That makes it patience."
>
> "Yes, I guess I'm learning now," I said. "*Right* now."
>
> "Brother," he said drily, "you have no idea how much you're learning—
> Please sit down."
>
> "All right," I said, sitting down again. "But while ignoring my personal
> education for a second I'd like you to remember that the people have little
> patience with us these days. We could use this time more profitably."
>
> "And I could tell you that politicians are not personal persons," Brother
> Jack said. (465)

The Brotherhood's failure to recognize the significance of the individual provokes

the main character's desire for existential individuation, or self-concretization. From that

point on, he will focus on an alternative to The Brotherhood, which he calls Rinehartism:

> My entire body started to itch, as though I had just been removed from a
> plaster cast and was unused to the new freedom of movement. In the South
> everyone knew you, but coming North was a jump into the unknown. How
> many days could you walk the streets of the big city without encountering
> anyone who knew you, and how many nights? You could actually make

> yourself anew. The notion was frightening, for now the world seemed to flow before my eyes. All boundaries down, freedom was not only the recognition of necessity, it was the recognition of possibility. And sitting there trembling I caught a brief glimpse of the possibilities . . . (499)

Rinehartism allows the main character to contemplate indulging in a fanatical freedom, a freedom to become legion, per se, one who can become a many and a many who can become a one. However, we could argue over whether the main character has actually overcome his inauthenticity at this point. Yes, he has chosen to be a Rinehart but does that kind of "consciousness" really set him free?

If I strictly apply Kierkegaard's account of "The Individual" to Ellison's main character's acceptance of Rinehartism, I would have to say that the main character fails to be one. He fails because he does not take that wondrous "Leap of Faith to God" that is required in order to move from the Ethical to the Religious. What the main character actually does is return to the Kierkegaardian First Stage, towards the Aesthetic, where, in his Rinehartism, he indulges in a fanatical freedom of individuation.

Having mainly used Heidegger, Sartre, and Kierkegaard to analyze the authenticity of the main character before the *anagnorisis*, I can say that they all show him to be inauthentic. The main character lacks a "consciousness," or an awareness, of the life values and structures of the They-Self that would allow him to construct himself as an I-Self. Thus, he fails to be authentic in the Heideggerian sense of the term. What follows is that this very same lack of "consciousness" hinders the main character from producing a "plan" that he could use to choose to actualize his life. Thus, he fails Sartre's definition of authenticity. Finally, because the main character is not religious at all, he would not be

able to choose to be "The Individual" in the way Kierkegaard argues. Thus, he fails to be authentic in the Kierkegaardian sense. Ultimately, then, when we study the main character for existential authenticity using classic existential definitions, we must say Ellison's main character in the *Invisible Man* fails. He is inauthentic.

So, when we study Ralph Ellison's anonymous main character from the *Invisible Man* through the philosophic optic of African American existentialism, the conclusion should be that the main character is mainly a diseased inauthentic non-individuated young man. That is, the main character is an existentially unconscious being who is not aware that he is free to make himself an independent self (an I-Self), and for that reason, he is led hither and thither by the desires of others. Until he rightly realizes his freedom to choose, he will continue to be existentially inauthentic.

Section Two: The Invisible Man's Authentic Individuation

Section One, "The Invisible Man's Inauthentic Non-Individuation," focused on making the case that prior to his *anagnorisis*, Ellison's main character, the anonymous first-person narrator in the *Invisible Man*, was a diseased inauthentic non-individuated young man who lacked, in any existential sense, an independent self (an I-Self). To make the case, I waded through all of Ellison's forms of invisibilities and polytropism to discover the source of the problem and found the revealing locus to be in the main character's existential crisis: an absence of a chosen independent self (I-Self) that made him invisible to himself.

I then dove deeper into the existential analysis to show how the main character did not meet Heidegger's and Sartre's definitions of authenticity, since he was not, in any strict sense, "conscious" enough to make a "plan" that could develop an I-Self. I then plummeted even deeper into the main character's crisis of self by studying what existentialists, specifically Heidegger, Sartre, and Kierkegaard, meant by having a self, authenticity, and "The Individual." Finally, I analyzed the main character's momentous problem with choosing to make a self through his desperate bout of Rinehartism, a name that comes from a character in the novel who appears to become many selves in order to cynically amass power over others.

Section Two, "The Invisible Man's Authentic Individuation," focuses on Ellison's affirmative, or positive, argument for existential authenticity. To produce this argument through an existential analysis of Ellison's main character, the anonymous first-person narrator, we need to keep in mind that we are interpreting Ellison's work mainly through

a close reading of the plot-structure arc of the narrative. Tracing the arc of the plot-

structure to its resolution in the Epilogue will allow readers to identify the following

anagnorisis, or recognition, of the main character:

> In going underground, I whipped it all except the mind, the mind. And the mind that has conceived a plan of living must never lose sight of the chaos against which that pattern was conceived. That goes for societies as well as for individuals. Thus, having tried to give pattern to the chaos which lives within the pattern of your certainties, I must come out, I must emerge. And there's still a conflict within me. With Louis Armstrong one half of me says, "Open the window and let the foul air out," while the other says, "It was good green corn before the harvest." Of course Louis was kidding, *he* wouldn't have thrown old Bad Air out, because it would have broken up the music and the dance, when it was the good music that came from the bell of old Bad Air's horn that counted. Old Bad Air is still around with his music and his dancing and his diversity, and I'll be up and around with mine. And, as I said before, a decision has been made. I'm shaking off the old skin and I'll leave it here in the hole. I'm coming out, no less invisible without it, but coming out nevertheless. And I suppose it's damn well time. Even hibernations can be overdone, come to think of it. Perhaps that's my greatest social crime. I've overstayed my hibernation, since there's a possibility that even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play.
>
> "Ah," I can hear you say, "so it was all a build-up to bore us with his buggy jiving. He only wanted us to listen to him rave!" But only partially true: Being invisible and without substance, a disembodied voice, as it were, what else could I do? What else but try to tell you what was really happening when your eyes were looking through? And it is this which frightens me:
>
> Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?
>
> (Ellison 581)

Since the above quote is an account of the main character's reemergence to

society, and one could even say rebirth to it, from a basement (or womb) he was hiding

(incubating) in in Harlem and since the main character's reemergence comes from his newly realized commitment to finally make an I-Self that resolves the conflict of not having one, which is strongly associated with the climax of the plot-structure, I believe I can justifiably claim that "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?" is the *anagnorisis* of the novel.

I can further give three major reasons why the quote is the protagonist's main recognition. First, the Epilogue is the continuation of the Prologue that gives us a summation of what the main character understands about his overall experience. That is, he tells us what he has generally learned from what he underwent and what actions he plans on taking as a result. Second, the problem of invisibility is explicitly addressed to the extent that the narrator can now describe it as a necessary life dialectic between the invisible and the visible that is manifestly a human universal. Third, the main character attempts to resolve the invisibility-visibility problem, at least his understanding of it, by integrating it with an *I-You*, or *self-other*, ontology**.**

Given that "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?" is the main character's main recognition, what does it mean in terms of an affirmative, or positive, existential argument for his particular type of authenticity? To understand what the main character means, one has to consider the positive argument that is revealed by considering the existential argument of the narrative itself. First of all, does Ellison satisfy the classic definitions of authenticity? If readers consider Heidegger's "consciousness," they will be able to see that even though it takes the main character until the very end of the narrative to become "conscious," he does become aware when he realizes that he

needs to make a decision to make an I-Self. Readers can see that he begins to do so when

he finally breaks away from the Brotherhood and decides to think for himself:

> All they wanted of me was one belch of affirmation and I'd bellow it out loud. Yes! Yes! Yes! That was all anyone wanted of us, that we should be heard and not seen, and then heard only in one big optimistic chorus of yassuh, yassuh, yassuh! All right, I'd yea, yea and oui, oui and si, si and see, see them too; and I'd walk around in their guts with hobnailed boots. Even those super-big shots who I'd never seen at committee meetings. They wanted a machine? Very well, I'd become a supersensitive confirmer of their misconceptions, and just to hold their confidence I'd try to be right part of the time. Oh, I'd serve them well and I'd make invisibility felt if not seen, and they'd learn that it could be as polluting as a decaying body, or a piece of bad meat in a stew. And if I got hurt? Very well again. Besides, didn't they believe in sacrifice? They were the subtle thinkers— would this be treachery? Did the word apply to an invisible man? Could they recognize choice in that which wasn't seen . . . ? (509)

The above quote is the first time that the main character *chooses* to completely

break away from a group so that he can begin to develop an I-Self. That is, he is coming

to an existential "consciousness," of who he can become, and, as a corollary of having an

awareness of who he can become, he can now "plan," as the main character does. In that

way, his thinking is moving towards the possibility of actualizing the classic

Heideggerian and Sartrean definitions of authenticity. To actualize an independent self,

though, in other words to become authentic, the main character now needs to actually

choose an *I- Self*.

When the main character abandons his belief in the Brotherhood, he had already

experienced much that could help him in self-making or turning himself into what

Kierkegaard calls "The Individual." However, readers must be careful. Even though we

can use Kierkegaard's "The Individual" to study Ellison's main character, Ellison does

not in any way imply a religious or theological element involving the value of faith and its private relationship with God, as Kierkegaard does. No, for Ellison "The Individual" is someone who has reached a transcendent level of understanding that one can neologize as occurring in the Visibility Stage, contra Kierkegaard's Religious Stage. Like Kierkegaard's Religious Stage, the person who enters it must do so alone. Moreover, this person must do so by leaping or falling (as is the case with our hero) into a realization of the possibilities of self and dialectically choosing one's own particular structures of self through visible-invisible binaries that must be actualized in society (which, in the case of the narrator, is outside the basement).

As the main character illustrates in his Epilogue, choosing from a visible-invisible binary that forms a dialectic in order to "keep it real" is a key component of existential choice. It is what makes Louis Armstrong's music so good. As he explains, Armstrong does not just keep the good and throw out "The Old Bad Air." He needs the dialectic to perform and produce the high quality of the music. In the same way, once one has chosen the structures to produce a self, despite having already transcended the Ethical and Aesthetic Stages, he or she must return to the social realm to concretize, or actualize, the visible-invisible I-Self in a dialectical fashion. Readers can call this the initial impetus for reemerging into society: the existential concretization, or actualization, of the self.

Once Ellison's main character reaches the Visibility Stage, he is free to choose from the visible-invisible binary structures to dialectically form himself as "The Individual." Readers can further see that that is the case in the Epilogue when the main character says that he has "belatedly to study the lesson of my own life" and that he has accepted his "humanity," which involves both accepting himself and others. More

importantly, readers can return to Ellison's allusion to Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* to see that the main character already has the ideas of actualizing himself in head, hand, and heart. He just needs to choose and realize a new "consciousness" to self-make:

> Stephen's problem, like ours, was not actually one of creating the uncreated conscience of his race, but of creating the *uncreated features of his face*. Our task is that of making ourselves individuals. The conscience of a race is the gift of its individuals who see, evaluate, record . . . We create the race by creating something far more important: We will have created a culture. Why waste time creating a conscience for something that doesn't exist? For, you see, blood and skin do not think! (354)

Once the main character reaches the Visibility Stage, he can begin existentially garnering even more from his experience, as readers can see in the quote above, to finally begin to make a self and begin to transform into "The Individual." As a result, he can finally "reemerge into society" in order to existentially actualize himself, as metaphorically expressed through his self-making of face, eyes, and voice.

When the main character realizes himself in the Visibility Stage through his main recognition, "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you," he finally realizes Heidegger's and Sartre's definitions of authenticity so that he can then go about actualizing them and, thus, himself in his reemergence from the basement. As a result, one can say that he is authenticating himself as a being-in-the-world. However, before his recognition, as was the outcome of the analysis of the main character in Chapter One, Section One, it was impossible for the main character to fulfill the classic definitions of authenticity. That is, even though he rejects the Brotherhood, even though he makes a choice to do so, that does not imply that he has developed into authenticity, the main

character simply chooses to choose from his desire for revenge, as one can see in the following quote:

> Suddenly I couldn't stand it.
>
> "Look at me! Look at me!" I said. "Everywhere I turned somebody has wanted to sacrifice me for my good—only they were the ones who benefitted. And now we start on the old sacrificial merry-go-round. At what point do we stop? Is this the new true definition, is Brotherhood a matter of sacrificing the weak? If so, at what point do we stop?" (505)

Once Ellison's main character finally decides to break away from the Brotherhood and to act out his grandfather's dying words against them and the world, that he should undermine whites by "yessing" them to death and destruction, he comes nearer to being authentic because he does begin to choose. The problem, though, is that when we analyze his motives for choosing, we see that it is based on a vindictive anger. This is the dominant motivation. For that reason, in addition to the fact that he has not chosen to develop a self as yet, he does not have any real control over his choices.

From his recognition, through his rejection of the Brotherhood, readers know that the main character is struggling through his vindictive anger to reach authenticity. Readers know that in order to reach the Visible Stage, he needs to experience this pivotal emotion so that he will have the opportunity to produce empathy. Readers can see this when Ellison has his main character move beyond his bad faith, or bad "consciousness," which his angry "plan" to betray the Brotherhood and humanity, whom he registers as having betrayed him, reveals**:**

> It rang again in my hand now and for no reason at all the words of

a childhood prayer spilled through my mind like swift water. Then: "Hello," I said.

It was a frantic, unrecognizable voice from the district. "Brother, you better get up here right away—" it said.

"I'm ill," I said. "What's wrong?"

"There's trouble, Brother, and you're the only one who can—"

"What kind of trouble?"

"Bad trouble, Brother; they trying to—"

Then the harsh sound of breaking glass, distant, brittle and fine, followed by a crash, and the line went dead.

"Hello," I said, seeing Sybil wavering before me, her lips say, "Boo'ful."

I tried to dial now, hearing the busy signal throbbing back at me: Amen-Amen-Amen-Ah man; and I sat there a while. Was it a trick? Did they know she was with me? I put it down. Her eyes were looking at me from out of their blue shadow. "Boo—"

And now I stood and pulled her arm. "Let's go, Sybil. They need me uptown" –realizing only then that I would go. (527)

Readers can see that in going to Harlem to stop the riots, which the main character will later realize is the Brotherhood's intention to intensify the socio-political unrest for its own so-called scientific ends, the main character has finally developed towards becoming authentic in the fullest sense of the term. The question, though, is in what *fullest* sense? Ellison goes beyond even Richard Wright in *The Outsider* in expanding the definition of authenticity. He has his main character transcend the values of individual, society, and history when he has him reject the Brotherhood so that he can choose the structures of a self.

This process of existential transcendence dramatically begins when Ellison has his character's self-making develop towards a quasi-Kierkegaardian concept of "The

Individual" in the Visibility Stage, after he finally rejects the Brotherhood and realizes

that its deterministic "science of history" is fatally flawed, since it can neither account for

the individual nor history. In this sense, the main character is initially a witness. He

realizes that he has seen individuals who have shaped history: "They'd been there all

along, but somehow I'd missed them. I'd missed them even when my work had been most

successful. They were outside the groove of history" (443).

When the main character recognizes the significant impact that individuals can

have on history, that they can have a real positive effect on reality, he can then reject the

so-called science of the Brotherhood and can begin self-making that will move towards

the structuring of himself as the "The Individual." Again, it is important for readers to

understand that Ellison's existential argument for "The Individual" includes self-making

in it, but it is also concerned with the existential notion that a person who makes himself

can have a real impact on history itself, which entails real agency. In the narrative, it is

the main character's own response to this question, and its implications, which is a

definite reversal of his previous understanding derived from the Brotherhood, of the

relationship between the individual and history that Tod's suicide by cop initially elicited

from him:

> Why should a man deliberately plunge outside of history and peddle an
> obscenity, my mind went on abstractedly. Why should he choose to disarm
> himself, give up his voice, and leave the only organization offering him a
> chance to "define" himself? The platform vibrated and I looked down. Bits
> of paper whirled up in the passage of air, settling quickly as a train moved
> past. Why had he *turned* away? Why had he chosen to step off the
> platform and fall beneath the train? Why did he choose to plunge into
> nothingness, into the void of faceless faces, of soundless voices, lying
> outside history? (439)

As the above quotes shows, the main character has a previous understanding of history from the Brotherhood that does not value the individual, which, as a corollary, does not particularly value him. Readers, then, can know that the main character believes this because of his affiliation with the Brotherhood that spouted and supported the so-called communist deterministic theory of science (the novel's version of historical determinism) that only those members from the collective of the Brotherhood can be real agents who can have any real effect on history.

When we analyze who significantly influenced the main character to become "The Individual," I believe one should start with an account of Tod Clifton. As I read from the text, after searching long and hard for the missing director of the Harlem chapter of the Brotherhood, the main character discovers Tod selling Sambo dolls at a street corner, and in so doing, the main character is shocked to learn that he has dramatically betrayed the Brotherhood. By selling the Sambo dolls, Tod has chosen to "plunge out of history," which, from the Brotherhood's so-called science, means choosing not to participate in impacting the world in a real way as an agent. So, why did Tod choose to do that? The question provokes the main character to ask even more questions about the legitimacy of the Brotherhood.

The very idea of Tod's selling Sambo dolls should provoke thoughts about why he would choose such an absurd occupation after giving up the Brotherhood. Obviously, we could compare Tod's relationship to the Brotherhood to the Sambo doll's relationship to its manipulator. In the same way, the main character will come to the understanding that he was manipulated and deceived, and in fact, he will be able to abstract further from his

Tod/Sambo experience and realize that all his African American Harlemites have been deceived. Obviously, this will force him to think for himself.

Admittedly, the main character's experience with Tod's death does not directly produce his existential "consciousness," but it does put him on the road towards it. As readers know, as soon as he takes action leading a funeral procession to protest Tod's death by cop and reflect on the precariousness of Tod's life and all black lives in Harlem, the main character finally begins to think for himself. This is the very point that angers the Brotherhood when they interrogate the main character for taking such independent action. They want to know who gave him permission to lead the procession for Tod, who they know betrayed the Brotherhood movement. The main character's answer is blunt. He did it on his own "personal responsibility." This is the beginning of the end of the main character's association with the Brotherhood.

When the main character finally realizes that the Brotherhood does not have him as a particular person in mind and that, as a result, he has to take his life into his own hands by following his grandfather's vengeful advice "to yes'm to death and destruction," he has yet to understand whether he can have any real impact on history. However, he now has the experience with three zoot suiters at the train station to reflect on whether he could:

> They were men out of time—unless they found Brotherhood. Men out of time, who would soon be gone and forgotten . . . But who knew (and now I began to tremble so violently I had to lean against a refuse can)—who knew but that they were the saviors, the true leaders, the bearers of something precious? The stewards of something uncomfortable, burdensome, which they hated because, living outside the realm of history, there was no one to applaud their value and they themselves failed to understand it. What if Brother Jack were wrong? What if history was a gambler, instead of a force in a laboratory experiment, and the boys his ace

in the hole? What if history was not a reasonable citizen, but a madman full of paranoid guile and these boys his agents, his big surprise! His own revenge**?** (441)

As the above quote shows, the main character's experience with the three zoot suiters allows him to consider whether the Brotherhood has any real historical agency and whether those the Brotherhood deemed non-agents are the true makers of history. This is one of the momentous experiences that will allow him to question the Brotherhood even before he is called to account for leading Tod's funeral procession on his own "personal responsibility."

The main character's experience with the zoot suiters would later give him the opportunity to question the Brotherhood's claim that they were the only ones who could be real agents of history. On the other hand, after his calamitous meeting with the Brotherhood members and his declaration to himself that he would do his best to get revenge on them and many others, based on his grandfather's dying words to "yes'em to death and destruction," the main character experiences a shocking revelation:

It was too much for me. I removed my glasses and tucked the white hat carefully beneath my arm and walked away. Can it be. I thought, can it actually be? And I knew that it was. I had heard of it before but I'd never come so close. Still, could he be all of them: Rine the runner and Rine the gambler and Rine the briber and Rine the lover and Rinehart the Reverend? Could he himself be both rind and heart? What is real anyway? But how could I doubt it? He was a broad man, a man of parts who got around. Rinehart the rounder. It was true as I was true. His world was possibility and he knew it. He was years ahead of me and I was a fool. I must have been crazy and blind. The world in which we lived was without boundaries. A vast seething, hot world of fluidity, and Rine the rascal was at home. Perhaps *only* Rine the rascal was at home in it. It was unbelievable, but perhaps only the unbelievable could be believed. Perhaps the truth was always a lie. (Ellison 498)

As the above quote shows, if the self is existentially defined as just the roles one takes, then the main character is now aware of the infinite possibilities of the self. The self can take on many roles. The self can become selves. Rinehart has shown him that. He now understands that he can be many in one and one of many.

Now that an account for the main character's experience with the zoot suiters, who, despite the pseudo-science of the Brotherhood, have taught him that an individual can be a real agent of history, and Rinehart, who taught him that one can play more than one role, and thus become many selves, we can return to and intensify the analysis of the main character's anger against the Brotherhood and his movement towards and beyond the Visibility Stage. That is, we now know that the main character is equipped to be an independent person and take on those who want to take that freedom away from him. For that reason, in the immediate aftermath of his final meeting with the Brotherhood, the main character can be angry with the Brotherhood and seek revenge against them and, one can even say, all the world. In short, the main character now knows that he has the freedom to choose, which in turn, allows him to finally understand the meaning of his grandfather's last words to "Yes em to death and destruction." So, when he leaves his final Brotherhood meeting, he is ready to be just like his grandfather, and in fact, just like all those who made him suffer, Norton, Bledsoe, Jack, and so on, who deceived him when he hardly knew himself.

The problem with the main character's seeking revenge, as his grandfather advised him to do, on whites and the very world itself, is that the main character had yet to understand that he was still reacting to all of them out of the trauma of disillusionment.

That is, the extreme pain of realizing that he had been duped by those whom he had trusted produces in him his angry desire for revenge. This means that that the main character had still not properly thought-out and actualized making a choice for himself concerning who he wants to be.

The main character's rush to help stop the Harlem riot obviously contradicts his plan to get revenge on the Brotherhood and the rest of the world. However, it does reveal that he is motivated by something other than his anger produced from the trauma of disillusionment. At this point, he begins to actualize what I have been calling the existential attributes that were already discussed in detail: empathy, ethics, and sociability. Readers can see, for instance, that he initiates his move away from his anger inspired plan for revenge against the Brotherhood and the rest of the world through his empathy. That is why when he receives an anonymous phone call telling him that there is going to be riot in Harlem, the main character rushes there to help. Despite the fact that the anonymous call is dubious, the Brotherhood might be setting up a trap, for instance, he still goes because he still very much cares.

When the main character gets to Harlem, his sense of ethics is exemplified by his experience with Scofield and Dupre. These two men show him the importance of coming together and righting a grievous wrong. Specifically, Scofield has lost a child as a result of the unhealthy squalor of the tenement buildings in Harlem, and he now aims to set those same buildings on fire: "'My kid died from the t-bees in that deathtrap, but I bet a man ain't no more go'n be *born* there'" (547). What strikes the main character is that these are people who are organizing for social justice outside of the Brotherhood:

"They've done it, I thought. They organized it and carried it through alone; the decision their own and their own action. Capable of their own action . . ." (548)

Finally, near the end of the narrative, the main character realizes a sense of sociability in his apocalyptic confrontation with Ras the Exhorter, who has transmogrified into Ras the Destroyer, the very personification of chaos itself. In his confrontation with this new Ras, the main character is forced to either accept or oppose the chaos that Ras represents. He chooses to oppose. Unfortunately, Ras knows his enemies:

> Someone called, "Look!" and Ras bent down from the horse, saw me and flung, of all things, a spear, and I fell forward at the movement of his arm, catching myself upon my hands as a tumbler would, and heard the shock of it piercing one of the hanging dummies. I stood, my brief case coming with me.

> "Betrayer!" Ras shouted. (Ellison 557)

When Ras chases the main character through the streets, he falls through an open manhole and he is able, by accidentally falling, to escape Ras. When constructing an existential account of Ellison's philosophy of authenticity, from the text, his depiction of this accident is itself no accident. That is, readers can argue that Ellison is letting us know that we are not completely in control of what occurs in our experiences, and for that reason, though we are free to choose what our lives mean, we may need to choose that meaning with or without the help of our external or internal circumstances. We may walk, run, leap, or fall into the meaning of our existence.

When one analyzes Ralph Ellison's main character from the *Invisible Man* through the philosophic optic of African American existentialism to see how he has

become authentic, the conclusion should be, after properly co-opting much helpful existential terminology, that the first-person anonymous narrator becomes authentic by passing through the Visibility Stage and emerging into society in order to become "The Individual." That is, in the Epilogue, in the basement, through the 1,369 lights, the main character becomes existentially "conscious" of the dialectic between the visible and the invisible and that one can "plan" to make oneself into "The Individual," who must emerge from the basement not only to make a self for oneself but also to join others in order to be socially responsible. In this sense, becoming "The Individual" involves both making a self and joining society so that "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you" reveals that the *I* very much needs the *you* to be an *I*.

Section Three: The Invisible Man's Visible Invisibilities and the African American Racial Construct

Section One, "The Invisible Man's Inauthentic Non-Individuation," focused on making the case that Ralph Ellison's main character, the anonymous first-person narrator was a diseased inauthentic non-individuated young man who was not, in any existential sense, "The Individual," which means, in short, an independent self. In the context of the narrative, I took this diagnosis to mean that the main character is a sickly unconscious being who ultimately reaches an epiphanic moment of healthful authenticity during the end of the novel.

To make the case, I put the main character on the couch, so to speak, so that we could analyze his inauthenticity. In doing that, readers would be able to wade through all the various and varied invisibilities and polytropism of the text to focus on the primary issue: the invisibility of the self. Readers could then delve deeper into how the main character did not initially meet both Heidegger's and Sartre's definitions of authenticity, since he was not "conscious" enough to make a "plan" that would allow him to develop a self. We even went deeper into what eminent existentialists mean by the self, authenticity, and "The Individual" so that we could elaborate on the main character's existential ailment. Finally, we studied the main character's problem with developing a self through his curious fling with Rinehartism, a name and, one can even say, a belief system that comes from a character in the novel who cynically becomes many selves in order to accumulate power over others.

Section Two "The Invisible Man's Authentic Individuation," on the other hand, focused on Ellison's affirmative, or positive, argument for existential authenticity. To see

this complex argument expressed through Ellison's main character, readers needed to keep in mind that it was mainly an interpretation of his work from a close reading of the plot-structure arc of the narrative that allowed us to identify the main character's *anagnorisis* near the end of a dramatic work. First, I focused directly on the main character's main recognition, "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you." I then analyzed the main character's recognition that invisibility is a universal human problem that needs to be addressed at the subjective level of particular human experience. This requires that a person becomes "conscious" in choosing and "planning" his or her life so that the person can actualize it.

Second, I made the case that Kierkegaard's "Three Stages on Life's Way" would be extremely useful for studying the main character's transformation into "The Individual." However, I also had to make the case that Ellison came up with his own modified iteration of Kierkegaard's "The Individual." With regard to existential authenticity, in forming an I-Self through the Aesthetic and Ethical Stages, Ellison's version described an invisible-visible dialectic in forming "The Individual" that reached, what was newly coined, as "The Visibility Stage."

Finally, I followed major episodes in the life of the main character that led him to his *anagnorisis*, "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?" Readers should understand that the main character's initial vengeful rejection of the Brotherhood was important for letting him understand his grandfather's vindictive death bed advice to "Yes" the white race "to death and destruction." I also noted, however, that the main character had to overcome this same vengeful advice through his sense of empathy, ethics, and sociability, which he experienced with the three zoot suiters,

Scofield and Dupre, Rinehart, and Ras the Destroyer, so that he could make himself a real agent of history through "The Visibility Stage."

Section Three will focus exclusively on "The Invisible Man's Authentic Individuation and the African American Construct." That is, now that readers know what Ellison means by existential authenticity, his particular take on "The Individual," they can study how the African American racial construct corresponds to his evolving existential account of authenticity in the narrative. To accomplish this goal, I will primarily carry out a close reading of salient passages in the novel that strongly express the main character's views and actions related to the African American construct. I will then follow the development of Ellison's "Individuation" (his desire to self-make with a "conscious plan" that includes the ethical, empathic, and sociable in a dialectic of invisibility) through the plot-structure trajectory of the narrative. Finally, I will relate Ellison's "Individuation" to the African American racial structure so that I can extrapolate its impact on the main character's particular conception of African Americanness.

As mentioned before, readers need to be extremely wary with how they read the opening of Ellison's *Invisible Man*: the beginning of the novel, the Prologue, is actually part of the ending of the main character's first-person narrative, the Epilogue. For that reason, when readers read the work with the existential argument and the plot-structure in mind, specifically, when they consider the *anagnorisis* ("Who knows but that on the lower frequencies I speak for you?") in relation to the main character's understanding of existential authentic individuation, they need to keep in mind that the main character has developed a particular existential "consciousness" of being and becoming as "The Individual." Knowing that he does ultimately develop this "consciousness" suggests that

when studying how it relates to the African American construct, we need to study the character from his inauthentic to his authentic modes.

At the outset of *Invisible Man*, Ellison does not have the main character explicitly talk about the African American racial construct. Ellison does not have to, since his main character is completely immersed in it. In other words, Ellison directly writes about the experience of being an African American. Readers can see this is the case when the main character experiences "The Battle Royal":

> I used the phrase "social responsibility" and they yelled:
>
>> "What's the word you say, boy?"
>>
>> "Social responsibility," I said.
>>
>> "What?"
>>
>> "Social . . ."
>>
>> "Louder."
>>
>> ". . . responsibility."
>>
>> "More!"
>>
>> "Respon—"
>>
>> "Repeat!"
>>
>> "—sibility."
>
> The room filled with the uproar of laughter until, no doubt distracted by having to gulp down my blood, I made a mistake and yelled a phrase I had often seen denounced in newspaper editorials, heard debated in private.
>
>> "Social . . . "
>>
>> "What?"
>>
>> they yelled.
>>
>> ". . . equality—"
>
> The laughter hung smoke-like in the sudden stillness. I opened my eyes, puzzled. Sounds of displeasure filled the room. The M.C. rushed forward. They shouted hostile phrases at me. But I did not understand. (31)

The above quote reveals a conflict that in itself reveals the African American racial-racist structure in opposition. Specifically, it shows the opposition of values that privilege white Americans over African Americans, whom the white Americans attempt to train to be inferior in thought, speech, and action.

When I examine the main character's existential sense of self, I see that he has not really understood the significance of being African American. He is unconscious, or unaware, that, for instance, "The Battle Royal" experience is a lesson for him to conform to the white power structure. This means that the main character is existentially inauthentic as an African American in at least two critical ways: First, he is unaware of the power rituals of white America. For that reason, he is totally at a loss as to why he has to fight nine other young African Americans in a ring, see a naked white woman, dive on a rug for gold coins that he later discovers to be fake, and then finally give a speech, through much blood, sweat, and tears, about social responsibility. Second, and one should say, more importantly, he is unaware of himself as becoming a young and free African American man. He has yet to understand that being an African American I-Self requires making choices. The primary choice, though, means choosing to accept, modify, or deny African American producing structures (all the forms, functions, values, and so on).

In "The Battle Royal," the main character's lack of "consciousness" is itself the very expression of inauthenticity, as Heidegger defines it. That is, he is "unconscious," or unaware of the structures that provide form and meaning to his life. Even when he goes off to college, readers can see his inauthenticity manifested when the main character is confronted by his middle-aged doppelganger at the Golden Day, a saloon where a patient,

an African American Vet recovering from a nervous breakdown in reaction to white

racism, tells the main character that he does not even know himself:

> "You see," he said turning to Mr. Norton, "he has eyes and ears and a good
> distended African nose, but he fails to understand the simple facts of life.
> *Understand*. Understand? It's worse than that. He registers with his senses
> but short-circuits his brain. Nothing has meaning. He takes it in but he
> doesn't digest it. Already he is—well, bless my soul! Behold! a walking
> zombie! Already he's learned to repress not only his emotions but his
> humanity. He's invisible, a walking personification of the Negative, the
> most perfect achievement of your dreams, sir! The mechanical man!" (94)

Worse, as the Vet tells the main character, he worships whites.

> "No, listen. He believes in you as he believes in the beat of his heart. He
> believes in that great false wisdom taught slaves and pragmatists alike, that
> white is right. I can tell you *his* destiny. He'll do your bidding, and for that
> his blindness is his chief asset." (95)

The main character's inauthenticity with regard to lacking a "consciousness"

about being and becoming an African American affects him in so many ways, but it

specifically makes him vulnerable to others. This is the very point that Dr. Bledsoe, the

African American president of the Founder's College that the main character is attending,

makes when he finds out that the main character has taken one of the school board

trustees to a forbidden area off campus. Despite the main character's protest that he was

only doing what the Trustee wanted, Dr. Bledsoe lets him know it is still his fault. It is his

fault not only because he drove the Trustee to a place where whites are not allowed to go

but also because he was not aware that as an African American, he is to lead whites to see

what African Americans want them to see:

"Ordered you?" he said. "He *ordered* you. Dammit, white folk are always giving orders, it's a habit with them. Why didn't you make an excuse? Couldn't you say they had sickness—smallpox—or picked another cabin? Why that Trueblood shack? My God, boy! You're black and living in the South—did you forget to lie?"

"Lie, sir? Lie to him, lie to a trustee, sir? Me?"

He shook his head with a kind of anguish. "And me thinking I'd picked a boy with brain," he said. "Didn't you know you were endangering the school?"

"But I was only trying to please him . . ."

"*Please* him? And here you are a junior in college! Why, the dumbest black bastard in the cotton patch knows that the only way to please a white man is to tell him a lie! What kind of education are you getting around here?" (139)

As the quote above shows, the unfortunate incident with Dr. Bledsoe and the main character reveals the expectations that Bledsoe has about young black youths: they should know how to handle whites because they have had that training as blacks from the South. However, even Bledsoe did not understand that some minds that he and his college had accepted and supposedly shaped would produce such youths who would believe all of the lies, including theirs, who, because the students were *too* extensively trained to be blind and submissive, were not "conscious" enough to protect themselves from whites.

One can imagine prior to his meeting with the main character that Bledsoe had never registered such a black youth who did not even have the basic survival skills to manipulate whites. As Bledsoe said, he believed this to be the basic equipment of all African Americans, especially if they came from the South. Of course, at bottom, Bledsoe was really neither concerned with the main character's personal development, nor interested in such abstract philosophical issues of existential authenticity. For Bledsoe was really concerned with having power, and for that reason, the main character was a serious danger

that had to be expelled from the college, and for that reason, Bledsoe did just that. To keep the main character ever running, more importantly, to keep him permanently away from the college and himself, Bledsoe gave him seven (initially unbeknownst to the main character) malevolent letters of non-recommendations for the main character to use in New York.

Regardless of Bledsoe's motives, the experience that the main character had at the Founder's College, especially the episode he had with Mr. Norton, culminated in revealing the main character's inauthenticity in terms of lacking a "consciousness" of himself that includes being aware of the African American racial construct. Even though I do not agree with Bledsoe that every African American from the South would have the survival skills training to necessarily evade and manipulate the white gaze, to an extent, I do agree that more than likely he would know how to. Moreover, I do think that the main character should know the black gaze, his gaze, the Bledsoe gaze, and the gaze of other black folk, which requires that the main character know himself. Of course, this is what makes Ellison's anonymous first-person narrator so startling: he is so naïve. He does not know how to use or handle the basic white and black gazes.

Once the main character is disabused of Bledsoe and his devious seven letters, once he settles in Harlem and begins to experientially connect with the place, the main character deals with a dramatic episode that opens his eyes to issues directly affecting himself and African Americans in general: his experience with the black dispossessed. Specifically, it is with a dispossessed elderly black couple that he begins to realize his empathy and his ability to articulate the plight of his people and himself:

> Something had been working fiercely inside of me, and for a moment I had
> forgotten the rest of the crowd. Now I recognized a self-consciousness about

them, as though they, we, were ashamed to witness the eviction, as though we were all unwilling intruders upon some shameful event; and thus we were careful not to touch or stare too hard at the effects that lined the curb; for we were witnesses of what we did not wish to see, though curious, fascinated, despite our shame, and through it all the old female, mind-plunging crying.

I looked at the old people, feeling my eyes burn, my throat tighten. The old woman's sobbing was having a strange effect upon me—as when a child, seeing the tears of its parents, is moved by both fear and sympathy to cry. I turned away, feeling myself being drawn to the old couple by a warm, dark, rising whirlpool I feared. I was wary of what the sight of them crying there on the sidewalk was making me begin to feel. I wanted to leave, but was too ashamed to leave, was rapidly becoming too much a part of it to leave. (271)

As the above paragraph shows, the main character can now appreciate the African American experience with empathy, ethics, and sociability, which readers can simply note, at this point in the narrative, as coming from a heightened sensitivity derived from his traumatic experience and expulsion from the college and his subsequent suffering at the hands of others who want power over him.

The main character's attraction to and subsequent membership in the Brotherhood has to do with his understanding that it would address the issue of dispossession, and by deeper implication, racism. In this way, he has to some significant degree become racially "conscious" in his desire to help African Americans in producing "Social Equality" in America. Another example of this desire is dramatically reflected in a black member of the Brotherhood's, Brother Tarp's, gift to the main character. The gift is a sawed-off manacle that Brother Tarp had when he escaped a southern chain gang. The manacle serves as both an artifact and a symbol that the main character can use to reconcile himself with the African American construct from which he initially feels alienated.

When one analyzes the Brotherhood's ideological position on race, specifically its view on the African American racial construct, I can readily see why the main character would eventually have problems with it. That is, since the Brotherhood, through its version of the science of dialectical materialism, only recognizes itself as a real structure of history, race cannot be real, which implies that the African American racial construct cannot be real to them. As a senior member of the Brotherhood bluntly puts it during a heated quarrel with our protagonist, race should not even be brought up for discussion: "'Black and white, white and black,' Tobitt said. 'Must we listen to this racist nonsense?'" (469)

Readers can use Ellison's depiction of the African America experience in Harlem, specifically several major episodes that the main character has there, to refute the Brotherhood's dubious claim that it is the sole possessor of reality and that the racial construct is not real. Readers can look directly at each episode that particularly falsifies the Brotherhood's pseudo-science. With Rinehart, for instance, readers can see that the Brotherhood's science cannot describe a person as capable of making oneself one or many or both: "You could actually make yourself anew. The notion was frightening for now the world seemed to flow before my eyes. All boundaries down, freedom was not only the recognition of necessity, it was the recognition of possibility" (499). Studying Rinehart allows us to see the infinite possibilities of becoming and being an African American at the level of the individual and the collective. Obviously, the Brotherhood cannot account for that.

With Rinehart and the three zoot suiters, readers have already seen the refutation of the Brotherhood's so-called science and its take on race through the understanding that as a construct, race has infinite possibilities for being real. However, with Ellison's

depiction of Scofield and Dupre, readers have an example of African Americans in organized and coordinated action that the science of the Brotherhood claims it could never have. Readers need to look back at a quote used earlier to note that point: "They've done it, I thought. They organized it and carried it through alone; the decision their own and their own action. Capable of their own action . . ." (548). Despite the Brotherhood's position on race, we can see that the African Americans can come together to effect a change in the community, and by extension, society, which again refutes what the Brotherhood claims it is and can do.

With Ras the Exhorter-turned-Destroyer, once again, readers can witness race proving Brotherhood science wrong. This time, however, readers can see the refutation reveal itself in a radical and deeply nihilistic way in Harlem: "[T]hey moved in a tightknit order, carrying sticks and club, shotguns and rifles, led by Ras the Exhorter become Ras the Destroyer up a great black horse" (556). That is, Ras the Destroyer shows readers that the African American construct can produce the negation of itself and all possibilities. It can become racially self-annihilating or genocidal. What's worse, as readers can readily infer, the Ras type can not only annihilate Harlem blacks, but also whites and all of humanity. It can become apocalyptic. That is, the possibility of Harlem being completely destroyed can also extend itself to mean that all things can possibly be destroyed. Even though the Brotherhood wants Harlem to devolve into a local race riot, it does not consider that this may include them too, if not now, then later.

So, having studied these major narrative episodes dealing with African American experiences, specifically during the Harlem riot, readers can see that Ellison's depiction of the African American construct easily refutes the Brotherhood's so-called scientific

claim that it is the sole possessor of historical reality and agency. With Rinehart, there are infinite possibilities for the African American construct, which refutes the Brotherhood's claim that it is the only movement that knows and can describe historical necessity. Moreover, with the zoot suiters, we see the actualization of African Americans as agents that refutes the Brotherhood's claim to sole possession of agency. Then, with Scofield and Dupre, we can see that they refute the Brotherhood's claim that it is the only movement that can have an impact on society through organization and coordination. Finally, Ras the Destroyer reveals that the African American construct can produce the possibility of the apocalyptic for one and all races. These are all possibilities that the Brotherhood has not even considered.

Readers can see that the African American experience in the text can itself easily refute the Brotherhood's claim that it is the sole possessor of reality and that African American agency, as a result, is not real. However, it is important to keep in mind that the analysis focuses on the African American construct in order to show that it is a significant aspect of the main character's authentic self-making. For that reason, to focus on that point, we need to consider how the main character reaches his main recognition in the Visibility Stage that allows him to reemerge from a basement in Harlem to attempt to become "The Individual." To understand the main character developing into authenticity, we can continue to mainly use Heidegger's and Sartre's "consciousness" and "plan" respectively and Kierkegaard's *Three Stages on Life's Way* and *Fear* and *Trembling* to analyze the main character's aforementioned major episodes with African American construct and how these episodes affect him.

Even though it is true that his sense of a They-Self to some extent comes from his past and that this past reveals the structure and content of his African Americanness, the main character must choose to understand that who he can become is still very much a matter of what and who he chooses to be, which may or may not include being an African American. The main character, though, does not immediately understand this until he encounters Rinehart. Rinehart allows him to see that an African American is not limited: "And sitting there trembling I caught a brief glimpse of the possibilities posed by Rinehart's multiple personalities and turned away" (499). At first glance, the main character is awed by Rinehart's revelation, but he soon learns that who he can be comes from the infinite possibilities of self-making, whose limitation comes only from his own imagination.

Not only is the African American construct not limited in number, in the singular or plural, but he or she is a veritable free agent of history, which means that the main character can have a real impact on history. Readers can return to the three zoot suiters to see that the main character learns that he is capable of having a genuine effect on history through them: "But who knew (and now I began to tremble so violently I had to lean against a refuse can)—who knew but that they were the saviors, the true leaders, the bearers of something precious?" (441). The main character's experience with the three zoot suiters, then, shows that being an African American is not detrimental to being and becoming a real agent of history. In fact, it shows him that African American agents have always existed so that the individual impact on history continues.

The realization of the African American construct is also important for the main character's self-making in that not only does he need to make an I-Self but he also needs

to willingly choose to be part of society. His experience with Scofield and Dupre is important for him in that respect: "He [Scofield] was a type of man nothing in my life had taught me to see, to understand, or respect, a man outside the scheme till now" (547). In order for Schofield to burn certain Harlem tenements down, he has to first realize who he is. This requires that he values himself. As he said, he refuses to let himself and others live in such a squalid and debilitating way. Second, the main character needs to relate his actions to their consequences to the community. This requires that he empathize with himself and others.

The main character also deals with self-making through understanding and actualizing the significance of the African American construct with Ras the Destroyer. Even though Rinehart has taught him the infinite possibilities of being and becoming a human being, which also readily applies to the African American construct, with Ras, the main character learns that self-destruction is possible too. This time, though, it involves the nihilistic tendency of a self that can produce the possibility of racial genocide and/or the apocalypse:

> "But anyone can see it," I shouted. "They want a race riot and I am against it. The more of us who are killed, the better they like—"
>
> "Ignore his lying tongue," Ras shouted. "Hang him up to teach the black people a lesson, and there be no more traitors. No more Uncle Toms. Hang him up there with them blahsted dummies!"
>
> "But anyone can see it," I shouted. "It's true, I was betrayed by those who I thought were our friends—but they counted on this man, too. They needed this destroyer to do their work. They deserted you so that in your despair you'd follow this man to your destruction. Can't you see it? They want you guilty of your own murder, your own sacrifice." (558)

Through his experience with Ras the Destroyer, the main character learns that a person can be tempted to extinguish the I-Self and the world, though the reason be a mad one. It is a temptation that Ras brings and the main character rejects. Moreover, it is a classic existential temptation that Albert Camus makes much of in the opening of *The Myth of Sisyphus*: "There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy" (3).

In terms of constructing a self, Rinehart, the three zoot suiters, Scofield and Dupre, Ras the Destroyer, and others provide the experience that the main character needs to realize the structure and content for becoming and being an African American. From them, the main character learns the existential attributes as virtues of being an African American, which involves empathy, ethics, and sociability. Having learned, though, the main character still needs to put it all together so that he can realize his *anagnorisis*: "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?" To come to that realization, to give birth to himself, the main character needs to move towards the Visibility Stage.

I am tempted to say that it is the African American construct alone that necessarily allows the main character to realize the Visibility Stage, but that would be wrong. He realizes it is not because he is black, but because he is a black human being. I do want to say that all racial constructs have the potential to realize the Visibility Stage, not because I am being inclusive for the sake of being inclusive. No, I am saying that all can and do make the existential decision to construct selves. Having said that, I can now say that the main character was necessarily African American to the extent of what Heidegger in

German called *verfallenheit*, or in English, "Throwness or Falling," which has to do with the brute truth that the main character was born on a particular day, by particular parents, in a particular culture, that contained the structure and content of being particularly African American. The existential question with regard to authenticity, then, was whether he would choose to acknowledge this and proceed to make plans to actualize himself from within it.

So, when the main character finds himself in a Harlem basement, where he reaches what we can call the Visibility Stage, the main character has finally developed enough of a "consciousness" of the African American construct to allow him to figure out that he can make himself. He finally chooses to do so in a way that both recognizes and assimilates the facticity, or brute facts, of his existence, and simultaneously allows him to transcend his facticity by way of the truth of his subjectivity, which, as Kierkegaard points out, is where truth actually resides.

Section Three focused exclusively on "The Invisible Man's Visible Invisibilities and the African American Racial Construct." We now know what Ellison means by existential authenticity, his take on "The Individual": "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you." That is, we know that the main character finally understands that he needs to emerge from the basement, literally and figuratively, so that he can actualize himself. He can do this because he now understands, mainly through his experience in Harlem with the Brotherhood, the three zoot suiters, Rinehart, and Ras the Destroyer, that he can freely make himself through an interaction between structures of self and other, a dialectic of individuation. Moreover, we know that the main character's self-making is not *ex nihilo*. He must recognize the brute fact of the African American

construct that he was born into so that he can build from it. This recognition is important because it allows that the construct of the self requires a "consciousness" and a "plan" from an ever-present preceding structure that one can accept or reject. Through what we have called the existential virtues of empathy, ethics, and sociability, our main character accepts.

Chapter Three: James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and African American Authenticity

Section One: John Grimes's Struggle with Existential Inauthenticity

In this chapter, I want to make the case for the development of the main character's existential authenticity in James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. To do so, each of the three sections in the chapter will also center on the inauthenticity-authenticity binary and its impact on the fourteen-year-old main character's, John Grimes's, sense of being an African American.

Section One, "John Grimes's Struggle with Existential Inauthenticity," will focus mainly on understanding that, even though there are many types of contentions, or struggles, in the narrative that the main character deals with, the central (existentially intrinsic) one involves his not choosing to make an existentially independent self (which I will call an I-Self, as Heidegger defines a person who "consciously" chooses to accept and/or create life defining structures that he or she can actualize for existence).

As a result, the study will conclude that John's struggle for self-making reveals that he is suffering from a deep dread and despair from not choosing to choose to make an I-Self. Moreover, the analysis will detail the development of the main character's experience in order to see whether he meets the classic Heideggerian, Sartrean, and/or Kierkegaardian definitions of existential authenticity. An attempt will be made to account for how he succeeds or fails to meet their definitions so that an attempt can be made to reveal whether Baldwin puts forward any new existential values or attributes that the main character may have that would allow him to become existentially authentic.

Section Two, on the other hand, will focus on "John Grime's Transformation into *The Newly Anointed Saint*." In this section, through an examination of his *anagnorisis*, the protagonist's main recognition, the analysis will focus on Baldwin's positive, or affirmative, argument for existential authenticity by way of John's spiritual initiation into sainthood. To do that, the analysis will show the main character finally developing an I-Self through an intense struggle between his They-Self (which is the opposite of the I-Self and which is, as Heidegger puts it, a person who is dependent on typical, conventional, or traditional life structures of others to form an identity) and the Holy Spirit, who is identified here in Pentecostal terms as one of the three personified parts of the Christian God (the other two being Jesus, the Son, and God, the Father), whom Baldwin presents in Part Three of his novel, "The Threshing-Floor."

That is, through the intervention of the Holy Spirit, who is essentially the personification of God's power that mainly functions to give aid, comfort, and guidance to those in spiritual need, John will realize the importance of consciously choosing to choose to make a self for himself, and thus, he will be able to create an independent I-Self. Once he does that, it will demonstrate whether Baldwin incorporates Heidegger's, Sartre's, and/or Kierkegaard's definitions of existential authenticity to his own. It will also show whether Baldwin contributes any new existential values, or attributes, to the classic definitions of existential authenticity.

Finally, Section Three is "John's Struggle with Authenticity and the African American Racial Construct." In this last section, I will analyze how John's development from the existentially inauthentic to the authentic significantly impacts his sense of being an African American. For that purpose, the analysis will center on how existential

individuation affects his realization of the facticity, or brute facts, of his life, and the sense of his subjective truth, Kierkegaard's phrase for the kind of truth one makes in one's spirit or consciousness, which I will analyze as it pertains to the African American racial construct of John's life.

When an analysis of James Baldwin's main character, John Grimes, from his novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), is made through the philosophic theory of African American existentialism, the conclusion should be that the main character is mainly a troubled inauthentic non-individuated youth who eventually becomes *The Newly Anointed Saint*, a newly coined term that I apply to Baldwin's particular use of the concept of saint. That is, initially, the main character is an existentially disturbed unconscious being who ultimately reaches an epiphanic moment of healthful authenticity at the end of the novel. However, once again, such a melodramatic diagnosis, and outcome, of the main character suggests that the study has already gotten very much ahead of itself. To justify the conclusion, I need to carefully examine the origin, meaning, and major implications of the central diagnosis that eventually compel John to actualize himself existentially.

To understand the main character's central diagnosis, that initially in the novel he is a troubled inauthentic non-individuated youth, the analysis needs to first focus on the etiology of his existential inauthenticity. That is, a proper analysis of the main character's existential ailment requires the study of the origin and cause of his inauthenticity so that one can rightly comprehend the main character's initial incapacity to make an independent self. Moreover, the analysis needs to follow the complexity of the self-making struggle thoroughly so that one can understand that what complicates his

existential conflict against self-actualization is his extremely dysfunctional relationship

with his stepfather and his incipient homosexuality, which then deeply impact his

relationship with his mother, siblings, aunt, the world, and even God:

> He lived for the day when his father would be dying and he, John, would curse him on his deathbed. And this was why, though he had been born in the faith and had been surrounded all his life by the saints and by their prayers and their rejoicing, and though the tabernacle in which they worshipped was more completely real to him than the several precarious homes in which he and his family had lived, John's heart was hardened against the Lord. His father was God's minister, the ambassador of the King of Heaven, and John could not bow before the throne of grace without first kneeling to his father. On his refusal to do this had his life depended, and John's secret heart had flourished in its wickedness until the day his sin first overtook him. (21)

As the above quote shows, especially in the last sentence, John has been inwardly

contending with his stepfather to the extent that he can say that he looks forward to his

stepfather's final dying day so that he would curse him. This shows the extreme degree of

John's hostility towards his stepfather that impacts his existential self-development,

which concerns the following analysis since the focus is on John's authentic self-making.

If the analysis were to end with the above block quote: "On his refusal to do this

had his life depended, and John's secret heart had flourished in its wickedness," and if an

extrapolation of John's thoughts and behavior from that quote alone were given, I would

have to say that John would have continued contending with his stepfather until he could

actually produce his much desired imprecation against him. However, when the rest of the

sentence is factored in: "until the day his sin first overtook him," then my analysis has to

consider that John's self-making has been further complicated and that, as evidenced from

the extreme psychic and spiritual pain it is causing him, he has reached an immediate

existential crisis as a result of this "sin" that compounds with his "wickedness." The

pertinent question, then, is what exactly is John's "sin"? To identify it, the analysis

requires the following quote:

> He had sinned. In spite of the saints, his mother and his father, the
> warnings he had heard from his earliest beginnings, he had sinned with his
> hands a sin that was hard to forgive. In the school lavatory, alone, thinking
> of the boys, older, bigger, braver, who made bets with each other as to
> whose urine could arch higher, he had watched in himself a transformation
> of which he would never dare to speak. (19)

As the above quote shows, not only is John willfully contending with his

stepfather for the power of self-determination, which he perceives as his "wickedness,"

but John is also unwilfully struggling with his sexuality, which is his inchoate

homosexuality, his so-called particular and peculiar "sin," so that his existential self-

making (I-Self) is initially impeded in that compound way.

Even though John's major impediments, the extrinsic two that substantially get in

the way of his possibly resolving his existential crisis, come from his stepfather and his

sexual development, a further analysis shows that John's life is complicated even more as

a result of his problematic relationships with his younger brother, Roy, and his highly

repressed love relationship with his fellow teenage churchgoer, Elisha.

With regard to Roy, readers can see that the problem that John has with his

younger brother has to do with their father's extremely discrepant relationship with them.

That is, their father has an austere relationship with John that is quite the opposite of the

permissive one he has with Roy, which produces a warped sibling rivalry that the father

uses to make his case against John. It is a discrepancy that John's Aunt Florence

vehemently points out when his stepfather unfairly blames John for Roy's getting hurt: "'*He* [John] better take it like a warning?' shrieked Aunt Florence. '*He* better take it? Why, Gabriel, it ain't him went halfway across this city to get in a fight with white boys. This boy on the sofa went deliberately, with a whole lot of other boys, all the way to the west side, just looking for a fight'" (46).

John's relationship with Elisha is also tainted as a result of the particular kind of Christianity that contaminates the natural processes involved in John's sexual awakening. Because his Pentecostalism is a form of extreme Christian fundamentalism, many of the Old Testament commandments are read literally or without any understanding of human nature. Thus, it is important to keep in mind that from the point of view of Pentecostalism, both sexuality and homosexuality are major sins, the former involving Adam's Fall from perfection in his *knowing* Eve in the Garden of Eden and the latter that is condemned in such frequently quoted passages as Leviticus 18:22: "Thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind: it is an abomination." For that reason, based on his hearing and reading of Pentecostal anti-sexual extremism from the church and the Bible, I can surmise that John's feelings and reactions to Elisha may indicate a psychological and/or spiritual disturbance stemming from a convicted self:

> But he was distracted by his new teacher, Elisha, who was the pastor's nephew and who had but lately arrived from Georgia. He was not much older than John, only seventeen, and he was already saved and was a preacher. John stared at Elisha all during the lesson, admiring the timbre of Elisha's voice, much deeper and manlier than his own, admiring the leanness, and grace, and strength, and darkness of Elisha in his Sunday suit, wondering if he would ever be holy as Elisha was holy. (13)

As the above quote shows, given the narrative's early disclosure of John's sexual arousal from looking at boys in the bathroom, John has an obvious fascination with Elisha that reveals a budding expression of love beyond the limited heterosexual version of it.

Knowing that the main character, John Grimes, contends with both his stepfather and his sexuality does allow readers to understand the dramatic contentions of Baldwin's narrative. However, a deeper existential reading of the work requires zeroing in on the specific existential elements (the intrinsic struggles with freedom, self-making, anxiety, etc.) that produce the actual existential crisis in the narrative. That is, John has yet to "consciously" choose who he wants to be. He has simply been acting and reacting to exigently given contentions and thus producing a self that others want him to be (that is, producing an existentially inauthentic They-Self).

John is existentially inauthentic because, in the very obvious Heideggerian sense, he is not "conscious" that he can freely choose to make himself as an I-Self. Thus, to extend now into a Kierkegaardian analysis, he is resentfully trapped within the Ethical Stage, where he contends against his hurtful stepfather and the world. For that reason, once he discovers what he is truly capable of, John attempts to develop strengths and sanctuaries of rebellion outside his home. At school, for instance, he decides to hone and pit his intellectual gifts against his stepfather, which his stepfather also resented him for: "[I]t was his identity, and part, therefore, of that wickedness for which his father beat him and to which he clung in order to withstand his father" (20). At the movies, in addition to offering him a chance to escape his drab gray existence, his imagination is further fueled in opposition to his stepfather. When watching *On Human Bondage*, a 1930s movie starring the late great femme fatale actress Bette Davis, John is further motivated to take

his revenge out on his stepfather and the world: "He wanted to be like her, only more powerful, more thorough, and more cruel; to make those around him, all who hurt him, suffer . . ." (39).

As previously noted, the problem with John not "consciously" choosing the Ethical Stage is the ethical judgments that he unwittingly passes onto himself. I can now interpret his thoughts and actions in terms of their being ethically complicit: John believes in the values that his stepfather believes in, and therefore, with those same values, he condemns himself. In terms of the two extrinsic existential impediments already pointed out, for instance, John condemns himself as being wicked because he rebels against his stepfather, which violates the fourth Mosaic Commandment of honoring one's father and mother, and he realizes that he is beginning to develop strong sexual feelings for other boys, which, as already pointed out in Leviticus 18:22, violates the prohibition against homosexuality in The Old Testament.

What further complicates what he perceives as his wickedness and his particular sexual sin is the very direct complicit expressions they take. To go back to John's relationship with his brother, Roy, we can witness how John is ethically compromised toward vengeful reciprocity as a result of this. When John's father is tending to Roy's bleeding head wound received from a gang fight with some white boys, John actually senses his stepfather's deep hostility towards him: "And John knew, in the moment his father's eyes swept over him, that he hated John because John was not lying on the sofa where Roy lay" (43). John's reaction is to respond to his stepfather's hostility with even greater hostility: "John could scarcely meet his father's eyes, and yet, briefly, he did,

saying nothing, feeling in his heart an odd sensation of triumph, and hoping in his heart that Roy, to bring his father low, would die" (43).

Understanding that John is in the Ethical Stage can also explain why his feelings for Elisha are so strongly confused and checked. Again, in condemning himself for being wicked and sinful, John is simply practicing his stepfather's extreme Pentecostal values onto himself. John, for instance, is attracted to Elisha, but he not only cannot make sense of it because of his youth but must also repress it and keep it from developing since according to fundamental Pentecostalism, it is a sin, and John believes that it is. For that reason, his interactions with Elisha become typical instances of sexual repression re-expressed in verbal and physical displacement: "With both arms tightening around John's waist he tried to cut John's breath, watching him meanwhile with a smile that, as John struggled and squirmed, become a set ferocious grimace. With both hands John pushed and pounded against the shoulders and biceps of Elisha, and tried to thrust with his knees against Elisha's belly" (52).

Since John is initially in the Ethical Stage, his existential inauthenticity occurs there because he follows the values given to him by his family and church. So, yes, John believes he is wicked and sinful because he believes in the good-bad values within the sphere of the Ethical. But at a more basic existential level, John is inauthentic in the classic Heideggerian sense: he is not "conscious" that the Ethical structures are just that: constructs that one can freely choose to accept or not, in the sense of believing them. Thus, the serious drawback with not being existentially "conscious" that he has a genuine choice in self-valuation is that John becomes complicit in the self-judgment that he is actually wicked and sinful.

A deeper understanding of Heideggerian existential authenticity would imply that even if John had not rebelled against his stepfather, he would still be inauthentic. John would still be a They-Self: a phrase adapted from Heidegger that describes a person who is existentially lacking in "consciousness" that he or she is following the typical, conventional, or traditional life structures, and thus he or she is being existentially inauthentic. John did not "consciously" choose the Ethical Stage. He simply fell into it. As mentioned, it is what Heidegger in German calls a *verfallenheit*, a "Throwness or Falling," that comes, in the case of the main character, as a result of the brute fact that John was born into a religious family that learned the Pentecostal version of good and bad. It is, as John was limitedly aware of, something that he has always remembered because it was his first and only memories: "Their church was called the Temple of the Fire Baptized. It was not the biggest church in Harlem, nor yet the smallest, but John had been brought up to believe it was the holiest and best" (12).

In sum, John is existentially inauthentic in the sense that he has yet to choose the inherited structures of his life because he is not "conscious" of them. There is, however, another level of inauthenticity that I have already touched on when describing John's being in the Ethical Stage: the main character's self-judgment of wickedness and sinfulness is itself a recognition of the existential inauthenticity of being complicit. John believes he is wicked and sinful because he really believes in the extreme Pentecostal valuations: "Indeed, it was no longer a question of belief, because they made that presence real" (14).

There needs to be a moment of clarification here, since the analysis continues to follow both Heidegger's definition of "consciousness" and Kierkegaard's "Leap of Faith"

to reach the Religious Stage in order for a person to become existentially authentic. Obviously, both concepts can be interpreted to be antithetical to each other. Strictly speaking, Heidegger's definition of existential "consciousness" involves a rational awareness of one's inherited life structures. This implies that one, in order to be existentially authentic, become aware of the life structures themselves, which involves being aware of such constructs as self, race, gender, class, family, community, society, and so on. The existential crux, though, of Heidegger's "consciousness" is being rationally aware.

On the other hand, with reference to Kierkegaard, taking the "Leap of Faith" to reach the Religious Stage involves not a **r**ational Heideggerian "consciousness" but a radical faith. It is a radical faith that harks back to St. Paul in the New Testament, who specifically summed it up in Hebrews 11.1: "Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." So, when Kierkegaard argues for a "Leap of Faith," as introduced in his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* and elaborated in *Fear and Trembling***,** he is arguing that one needs to let go of one's rational awareness and trust that the omnipresent, omniscient, and omnipotent God is taking care of it all.

Fortunately, for the purpose of the analysis in this section, before John's threshing-floor experience, it is easy to see that he meets neither Heidegger's nor Kierkegaard's definitions of authenticity. More importantly, neither we nor Baldwin need to reconcile the reason versus faith argument here. That is, John is existentially inauthentic in both the Heideggerian and Kierkegaardian sense. In the Heideggerian sense, he is inauthentic because he is not "conscious" of the life structures that both form and inform him. For that reason, he is oblivious to the fact that he can freely choose to

possess or reject all of the life structures, including the ethical ones that he experiences. On the other hand, John, in his inauthenticity, does not yet have enough spiritual strength to muster up a "Leap of Faith." For that reason, he has yet to give himself up completely to God so that he can have a direct and personal relationship with Him. So, John is existentially inauthentic in both the Heideggerian and Kierkegaardian senses, at least he is before Part Three, "The Threshing-Floor."

I would be remiss if I did not point out that Baldwin's existential argument is itself mainly couched allusively in archetypal church rhetoric. That point should not be surprising to anyone since the author is depicting John's and his family's religious *weltanschauung*, or worldview, which explicitly comes from his and his family's Pentecostal outlook. That is also why, just to give a limited etymological example here, it is no accident that Baldwin named his main character, John, his mother, Elizabeth, and his stepfather, Gabriel. Yes, they are common Christian names, but these names gesture artfully towards the transcendence that John should, and will, take in relation to becoming existentially "conscious" and moving beyond the Ethical Stage to the Religious one.

Even though it is true that there are five characters named John in the New Testament, the one that Baldwin's John most resembles is John the Baptist. Like John the Baptist, his mother is named Elizabeth. Like John the Baptist, someone called Gabriel, who is not John's biological father, is involved. Like John the Baptist, John Grimes needs to decide if he is going to serve God. Moreover, like John the Baptist, he must choose to serve as a witness to Jesus and to the reality of a transcendent loving deity. Finally, and most importantly, like John the Baptist, he must actualize himself through a spiritual baptism.

Baldwin's generation of the New Testament subtext helps him to produce a semantic resonance in his work. This is true for Baldwin's archetypal allusions to the New Testament characters of John, Elizabeth, and Gabriel. Moreover, readers should be aware that Baldwin is not simply manipulating the text for that one-dimensional effect. In other words, the existential analysis developed here recognizes that the New Testament's John the Baptist subtext readily corresponds with Kierkegaard's Life Stages and Heidegger's account concerning "consciousness." Like John the Baptist, Baldwin's main character is seeking to transcend this pitiful mortal coil: "Suddenly, there arose in John a flood of fury and tears, and he bowed his head, fists clenched against the windowpane, crying, with teeth on edge: 'What shall I do? What shall I do?'" (31).

When considering existential authenticity and the three necessary existential attributes as virtues associated with it: empathy, ethics, and sociability, readers can see that, in his anger with his stepfather, all three are impacted. In terms of empathy, readers can see that John is lacking it in reference to his stepfather. That is, even though he may be very much justified in his anger towards his stepfather, Gabriel, John does not emotionally connect with him enough to understand that there may be a story behind his mistreatment of him, which Part Two allows readers to see. This is not to say that John should not be angry with his stepfather. It means that John should attempt to understand his anger so that it would not impede with his existential self-making, the development of his I-Self.

One of the implications of inauthentically being in the Ethical Stage is that the inauthentic person blindly believes in the given good or bad values. This is obviously the case with John. He believes in the good and bad valuation of his parents' extreme

Pentecostalism so that he sees people through the false dichotomy of either being saints or sinners. For that reason, in terms of the existential virtue of sociability, John's sociability is initially marred. For him, the church has the saints, and the world has the sinners: "These men and women they passed on Sunday mornings had spent the night in bars, or in cat houses, or on the streets, or on rooftops, or under the stairs. They had been drinking. They had gone from cursing to laughter, to anger, to lust" (12). With those in the world, John is forbidden to relate because, as the Bible says, one must be in the world but not of it. John must, therefore, condemn them all because that is what he, and everyone in his church, must do.

Mired and marred in the Ethical Stage before his threshing-floor experience, John Grimes has to be existentially inauthentic because he truly believes in what his stepfather and the Pentecostal church say about him. That is, John really believes in what Gabriel says when he tells John that he has the face of Satan, and for that reason, John really believes that his stepfather's religion condemns him too. So, even though he is a highly empathic young man, John will deem himself to be wicked in terms of his disobedience to his stepfather. What finally pushes him over the precipice, however, is his existential crisis: John perceives that he is sinful in terms of his incipient homosexuality, which, as pointed out, the Bible condemns as an abomination in Leviticus 18:22. Until John rejects this complicit They-Self, the inauthentic self that unconsciously chooses the existential structures of others, he will continue to be an inauthentic person.

Section Two: John Grimes's Transformation into *The Newly Anointed Saint*

When an analysis of James Baldwin's hero, John Grimes, from his novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) is undertaken through the lens of African American existentialism, the conclusion should be that the main character is a severely troubled inauthentic non-individuated fourteen-year-old youth who eventually reaches Kierkegaard's Religious Stage and becomes *The Newly Anointed Saint*. That is, initially, the main character is a spiritually disturbed unconscious being who ultimately reaches an *anagnorisis* that produces a healthful actualization of existential authenticity.

When analyzing John's *anagnorisis*, the main recognition of the narrative, from Part Three, "The Threshing-Floor" in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, readers can see that John transforms into something extraordinarily different as a result of falling onto the church floor in front of the altar and having God take up his soul:

> Then John saw the Lord—for a moment only; and the darkness, for a moment only, was filled with a light he could not bear. Then, in a moment, he was set free; his tears sprang as from a fountain; his heart, like a fountain of waters, burst. Then he cried: "Oh, blessed Jesus! Oh, Lord Jesus! Take me through!"
>
> Of tears there was, yes, a very fountain—springing from a depth never sounded before, from depths John had not known were in him. And he wanted to rise up, singing, singing in that great morning, the morning of his new life. Ah, how his tears ran down, how they blessed his soul!—as he felt himself, out of the darkness, and the fire, and the terrors of death, rising upward to meet the saints.
>
> "Oh, yes!" cried the voice of Elisha. "Bless our God forever!"
>
> And a sweetness filled John as he heard this voice, and heard the sound of singing; the singing was for him. For his drifting soul was anchored in the love of God; in the rock that endured forever. The light and the darkness had kissed each other, and were married now, forever, in the life and the vision of John's soul.

> *I, John, saw a city, way in the middle of the air, Waiting,*
>
> *waiting, waiting up there.*
>
> He opened his eyes on the morning, and found them, in the light of the morning, rejoicing for him. (204)

As the above quote shows, something wonderfully sublime has happened to John. At that moment, the main character has fallen under the powerful sway of what Pentecostals call the Paraclete, or the Holy Spirit, which means he now has been spiritually baptized, or immersed, into the resurrecting power of God. One could speculate on whether the main character has fully fallen for his stepfather's religion, specifically his austere Pentecostalism. However, before venturing out into an analysis on the main character's fidelity to his stepfather's conception of that religion, it is important to understand what led John into his spiritually immersive transformation.

Readers need to recall that one of the two salient experiential obstacles impeding the main character's authentic self-making is John's perception of his own wickedness, his hatred against his stepfather whom he rebels against: "He lived for the day when his father would be dying and he, John, would curse him on his deathbed" (21). Since the first function of the Holy Spirit is to purge the convicted one of wickedness through love, John's hatred, and thus his rebellion, against his stepfather ends as a result of his threshing-floor purification. This, of course, should not be misinterpreted to mean that John will never have any struggles with his stepfather from that point on. I can anticipate that he will: the Holy Spirit does not make a person perfect.

However, baptism in the Holy Spirit is itself a biblical fulfillment of God's promise that He will continually be present to cleanse him of hatred so that he may be better able to deal with temporal and spiritual struggles in a Christ-like manner: John

14:16-17: "[16]And I [Jesus] will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever; [17]Even the Spirit of truth; whom the world cannot receive, because it seeth him not, neither knoweth him: but ye know him; for he dwelleth with you, and shall be in you."

At first glance, with regard to John's incipient homosexuality, the second obstacle impeding his becoming existentially authentic, one would think that John's experience with the Holy Spirit would be extremely problematic. It is. In fact, there are many Pentecostal fundamentalist Christians who would argue with strong injunctions against homosexuality directly from the Bible. In addition to Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, they could cite Romans 1: 26-27 or I Corinthians 6:9, which reads, "Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind."

So how could someone who is obviously homosexual receive the Holy Spirit? One can anticipate that this is a hotly contested issue in fundamentalist Christianity. An extreme position is that it is impossible for anyone who is homosexual to receive the Holy Spirit. However, Baldwin, as readers can see, is having none of that. In fact, we have to keep in mind that Baldwin's account of John's experience comes from a particular emphatic but still quite traditional interpretation of the ecumenical power of the Holy Spirit: love. The Holy Spirit descends on John because he is filled with the desire for love, and love is what is fundamental to the Holy Spirit since the Holy Spirit is love and love is God. Or as 1 John 4:16 puts it, "And we have known and believed the love that God hath to us. God is love."

With regard to John's existential inauthenticity, the Holy Spirit empowers him to resolve the two main experiential obstacles that impede him from resolving it. That is, his

wickedness (his rebellion against his stepfather) and his sin (his incipient homosexuality) are overcome through his acquiring the empowering love of God through the Holy Spirit. As expressed in the following quote, through love, the Holy Spirit helps John to synthesize his experience in order to make it his own so that he can transcend it: "The light and the darkness had kissed each other, and were married now, forever, in the life and the vision of John's soul" (204). Baldwin's threshing-floor experience, then, functions to highlight John's spiritual sublimation near the altar as not just a metaphorical sifting and possessing of grain separating from all the chaff but a bringing together into a matrimonial union with oneself and the Holy Spirit so that the occasion of the threshing floor also becomes a carrying and passing through the threshold.

Despite his stepfather's animosity towards him, the Holy Spirt will help John to overcome his wickedness by giving him the strength to love his stepfather. Of course, this love is paradoxically transcendent. Why would anyone love someone who hates him? But the Holy Spirit empowers John to love beyond the temporal and into the spiritual plane where he learns that his stepfather's hatred reflects his mere mortal defect, his own particular sin.

Just as paradoxical as his love for his stepfather is John's experience of transcendence: his spiritual ascension comes from his descension. That is, to continue to give a Kierkegaardian take on his spiritual development, John's falling on the threshing floor, which involves the Holy Spirit descending up him, is his "Leap of Faith" that elevates him to the Religious Stage. In that elevation, readers can see that spiritually speaking John ends up believing in a universally loving Jesus, and in believing in Jesus,

in believing in the power of spiritual love, he has moved beyond the Aesthetic and Ethical Stages to have a direct and personal relationship with God.

Readers can now infer how his sense of sin, which he was contending with in the Ethical Stage, can be and is overcome: it comes through a spiritual transvaluation of values from God through the power of the Holy Spirit. The point is that in the Religious Stage, Ethical values can be transcended and thus consequently changed. God can, in the Religious Stage, transform what is deemed to be unethical to be acceptable for The Individual, the one God has chosen, and for humanity in general. This is the dramatic point Kierkegaard makes with his Abraham and Isaac illustration in *Fear and Trembling*. In the Ethical Stage, Abraham's intended sacrifice of Isaac should be counted as premeditated murder, but for the religious, it is deeply revered as an exercise of great faith on the part of Abraham, who then is proclaimed to be the Father of Faith.

So, when John undergoes the threshing-floor experience, readers can interpret him as reaching the Religious Stage. In that sense, Baldwin's work can be called Kierkegaardian. More importantly, since John has reached that Religious Stage, readers can identify him as being existentially authentic, at least when one reads the text using a Kierkegaardian approach. John is existentially authentic because he has chosen to take that "Leap of Faith" onto the Religious Stage that allows him to have a personal relationship with God. Consequently, he has reached a level of faith that individuates him from the mass of humanity who reside in the Aesthetic and Ethical Stages.

By authenticating John on a Kierkegaardian Religious Stage through the main character's threshing-floor experience, though, Baldwin presents us with an even more potent description of an existentially individuating character than even Kierkegaard's

account of "The Individual" (a person who has reached the highest life stage that allows

for a singular and direct and personal relationship with God) does. What specifically gives

potency to Baldwin's account of existential particularization? His use of the term *saint*

does. This, of course, requires a study of what Baldwin means by *saint* in the text and to

justify what makes it so potent in Baldwin's account. When I search the term *saint*

etymologically, denotatively, and denominationally, so that I can study how Baldwin uses

it in the context of his work, I can see that *saint* etymologically goes back to the Latin

word *sanctus*, which means "holy or sacred," and that it keeps its meaning through the

Middle French form *seinte* and morphs into the present English term *saint*. So, with

Baldwin's use of the term, I now know that at the very least, he means something or

someone that is found or deemed to be "holy or sacred."

Yet *saint* means much more in its contemporary denominational contexts. For

Catholics, *saint* denotes something or someone who is extraordinarily "holy or sacred."

For them, the title of *saint* involves an extremely heady and elaborate process of

ecclesiastical authentication that even involves the approval of very head of the Catholic

Church, the Pope. The Pope and the majority of high-ranking church members must deem

the person as deserving of the title through a recognition of a high and unique

manifestation of holiness on the part of said person:

> Holiness is the grace of God operating in and through human beings. The
> congregation's tests for holiness are also precise—indeed, they are almost
> schematic. Holiness is manifested by a two-tiered structure of virtues: the
> three supernatural (so called because they are infused by grace) virtues of
> faith, hope, and charity (love of God and of neighbor), and the four
> cardinal moral virtues (originally derived from the ethics of Aristotle) of
> prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance. Since all Christians are
> expected to practice these virtues, a saint is someone who practices them
> to a "heroic" or exceptional degree. (Woodward 223)

Probably because of its mission to minimize or negate the many powers of the Catholic priesthood, which in this case, involves authenticating *saints*, for Protestants, the word *saint* means anyone who has been accepted by God by way of being baptized in the Holy Spirit and becoming a member of the church. Consequently, all members of the Pentecostal church, whose denomination is derivationally Protestant, are saints. For that reason, associating with saints is a very common but dreadful experience for John: "There had never been a time when John had not sat watching the saints rejoice with terror in his heart, and wonder. Their singing caused him to believe in the presence of the Lord" (14).

Readers now know that when Baldwin uses the word *saint*, he means "holy or sacred" so that when he generally uses it in the novel, he means "a holy or sacred member" of the church. However, when considering how Baldwin uses the term in the novel, readers can see that he uses the term *saint* in basically three different ways. First, as mentioned, he refers to all Holy Spirit baptized members of the church as *saints*. In this case, Baldwin is being consistent with the Pentecostal use of the term. For that reason, I coin the phrase *church saints* to encapsulate that concept. On the other hand, when he writes about Florence, Gabriel, and Elizabeth in Part Two, which he entitles "The Prayers of the Saints," the term *saints* refers to what I call *life saints*, which involves the momentous experiences that certain characters have in the novel that derive from their particular spiritual struggles that occur outside being members of the Pentecostal church, which will be detailed further in the following analysis.

Even though John's Aunt Florence finally goes to church at the very end of Part One because she has become aware of her approaching death, Baldwin still counts her as

one of the three saints in Part Two, "The Prayers of the Saints." As a *life saint*, Florence

provides spiritual testimony directly from her experience that reveals her to be primarily

struggling with self-hatred coming from her not being loved. It goes back to when her

mother blatantly favored her younger brother, Gabriel, over her. She knows that her

mother has sacrificed her all for him, including her: "With the birth of Gabriel, which

occurred when she was five, her future was swallowed up. There was only one future in

that house, and it was Gabriel's—to which, since Gabriel was a manchild, all else must be

sacrificed" (72).

From her mother's sacrifice of her for Gabriel, Florence develops a hatred of him

that rebounds to become a self-hatred that, in turn, self-defensively manifests as her need

to think of herself as being superior to others. That is why she bleaches her skin and calls

her husband, Frank, who drinks and sings the blues, "a common nigger." Worse, when

she finds out that Frank has cheated on her, she makes his life so miserable that Frank

finally leaves her. For years, she isolates herself in bitterness. Later, when she realizes she

is mortally ill, she decides to put all things in proper order before she passes. For that, she

carries out her ultimate plan: to take Gabriel down by showing him the letter that

Deborah, Gabriel's late first wife, had given to her that exposes both his infidelity and the

child that resulted from it.

The way Gabriel treats John alone, never mind the whole Grimes family, in Part

One of the narrative makes it very difficult for readers to listen to this *life saint's* prayer

with any genuine sympathy. His extreme self-love, or his near narcissism, if you will, is

extremely off-putting. However, reading Part Two, "The Prayers of the Saints,"

specifically, "Gabriel's Prayer," one can at least develop a bit of sympathy for him there.

Yes, his mother's inappropriately excessive love enables him to vainly aggrandize himself

as God's chosen whose needs must be immediately met by all is frustrating and, yes, at

times, even disgusting, but this delusion is somewhat offset by his willingness to

subordinate himself to God and still take care of his family: as Elizabeth puts it: "'You

can talk about your Daddy all you want to,' said his mother . . . 'but one thing you can't

say—you can't say he ain't always done his best to be a father to you and to see to it that

you ain't never gone hungry'" (23).

Moreover, I believe readers cannot help but feel at least a bit of sympathy when

they see that his ambition to be God's chosen becomes continually thwarted by reality or

God not granting him that particular desire. Readers can see that this is the case when his

late first wife, Deborah, fails to conceive and eventually dies with her knowing that

Gabriel was unfaithful to her and that he had a boy child, Royal, with his mistress, Esther.

Then, for some time, readers see that Esther hid Royal from him. Later readers sense

Gabriel's sadness when he desperately tries to connect with Royal, and his son refuses to

do so. Much later, Gabriel's sadness is intensified by the death of his son. Finally, readers

can sense Gabriel's sadness and frustration when in his marriage to Elizabeth, he realizes

that with her, he is not going to be recognized as God's chosen and that his son Roy,

whose name literally signifies he is only half a Roy-al, will not be the son he wants him to

be, a spiritually noble chosen one like he wants to be.

As a *life saint*, Elizabeth's prayer reveals her to be primarily a self-abnegating

type. Baldwin shows readers how this becomes the case when he portrays her growing up

with a cruel aunt who, immediately after Elizabeth's mother's death when she was just

eight, took her away from her father, the owner of a house of ill-repute, and her home to

be subservient to her and the church so that both could save her from what they deemed to be her father's spiritually decadent neglect: "For when her mother died, the world fell down; her aunt, her mother's older sister, arrived, and stood appalled at Elizabeth's vanity and uselessness; and decidedly, immediately, that her father was no fit person to raise a child, especially, as she darkly said, an innocent child" (154).

When Baldwin continues to limn about Elizabeth, readers learn that even though she eventually attempts to rebel against her aunt with the love of her life, Richard, she has no choice but to capitulate to her aunt, the church, and society when her boyfriend, John's biological father, commits suicide. Richard's death is a tragedy that Elizabeth cannot get over. She loves him deeply, but without his even knowing about her pregnancy, Richard kills himself after police framed him for robbing a white man's store. What makes the situation even worse is that a black mother out of wedlock is ostracized by both black and white societies. Believing Gabriel's vows for marriage that he will be a good father to John, she marries him because she needs to protect herself and her baby so that they may become legitimate members of the community.

To sum up, I mention the most poignant moments of the saints' lives from Baldwin's "The Prayers of the Saints," in order to illustrate that they are a particular type of saint, *life saints*. As readers can see from the accounts of Florence, Gabriel, and Elizabeth, respectively, their "prayers" are not only prayers in the traditional sense of "talking to God" but spiritual testimonies revealing the desires and struggles expressed in their lives. Florence, for instance, suffers the throes of self-hatred as a result of her mother's sacrificing her for her brother, Gabriel. On the other hand, Gabriel wants to become God's specially chosen one. For that reason, he mainly cares about himself.

Finally, in addition to mourning for her long-lost love, Richard, Elizabeth desires to find legitimacy in a community of acceptance so that she and her son may experience acceptance and security in society. These are the prayers of the *life saints*.

With the portrayal of his youthful main character, John Grimes, Baldwin presents readers with the third and most important type of saint in the narrative: *The Newly Anointed Saint*, which I will later argue comes quite close to Kierkegaard's account of The Knight of Faith. As *The Newly Anointed Saint*, John does go through the process of incorporating the first two types of saints mentioned: the *church* and *life saints*. That is, as a member of the Temple of the Fire Baptized, readers do witness John becoming a church saint when he receives the power of the Holy Spirit on the threshing floor and the second type of saint, the life saint, as a result of his spiritual struggles that we witnessed outside of the church, specifically concerning his wickedness and sin. However, he becomes the third type of saint when he takes in the spiritual experiences of others in his visions on the threshing floor, which I will detail in the following paragraphs.

Readers now know that when the Holy Spirit lifts John up from the threshing floor, he becomes an official member of the church, and thus, becomes the first type of saint accounted here, a *church saint*. However, what specifically turns him into a *life saint*? That is, what are John's spiritual desires and struggles from his experiences that lead him to become one? When considering that, readers should once again turn to the account of John's wickedness (his rebellion against his stepfather) and his particular sin (his developing homosexuality), in order to realize that they have already witnessed them.

So, he is also a *life saint.*

What makes John's sanctification different in the narrative, though, is that the Holy Spirit that is involved in making him a member of the church (what turns him into a *church saint*) is also directly interacting with his spiritual struggles (what turns him into a *life saint*) to form a spiritual dialectic that produces the third type of saint in the novel: *The Newly Anointed Saint*, which primarily occurs through a positive spiritual transformation of the main character from within and without.

Because readers directly witness John's spiritual dialectic in Part Three, "The Threshing-Floor," which we do not see occur with Florence, Gabriel, and Elizabeth in Part Two, "The Prayers of the Saints," we get to see how the Holy Spirit impacts John's desires and struggles. As already pointed out, readers can see how John resolves his wickedness and sin. Through the Holy Spirit, John is converted through God's universal love, and this same love does not in any way support John's stepfather's treatment of him. In fact, despite his anger against his stepfather, John converts. He converts because he is now in love with love. Thus, John has overcome the struggle with his stepfather by transcending his hatred through a personal relationship with the God, his spiritual Father. This hate, then, is no longer in control of John's life since John's relationship with God spiritually counteracts the wickedness itself.

So, what about John's so-called sin? What about John's incipient homosexuality? How does *The Newly Anointed Saint* deal with that? Again, if readers interpret the content of John's Holy Spirit conversion, they can see that it does not in any way oppose homosexuality. That is, John is struck down on the threshing floor with love and no particular condemnation against love is ever made. More importantly, the Holy Spirit, descends on John because he has chosen to love in a way that God has approved, since the

Holy Spirit and God are ultimately one. If the Holy Spirit did not approve, He would, as any seasoned Pentecostal would know, convict the believer into righteous. The point is that the Holy Spirit does not in any way reveal John to be a sinner because of his homosexuality. Based on the Pentecostal account of the Holy Spirit, a lack of being convicted for a particular sin implies that there is no sin.

However, what exactly justifies my designating John as *The Newly Anointed Saint*? The fact that there is a spiritual dialectic between his being a *church saint* and a *life saint* distinguishes him from all the rest of the characters in the novel. This is not to say that the church saints and the life saints never went through a spiritual dialectic. They may have. Yet, beside John's, Baldwin does not provide an account of another in the narrative for us to witness. The only spiritual dialectic we witness in the narrative comes directly from John: "And something moved in John's body which was not John. He was invaded, set at naught, possessed" (193). What "invades" and "possesses" him is the Holy Spirit that produces the spiritual dialectic between Himself and the main character that cleanses him to become The *Newly Anointed Saint*.

How exactly does the spiritual dialectic impact John? This itself involves his accepting his family's and church's spiritual and experiential inheritance, which I am equating with what Heidegger calls accepting or becoming "conscious" of one's life structures. Readers need to understand that, whether John is immediately aware of it or not, both the *church saints* and *life saints* provide him with his existential legacy. They provide him with life structures that help him to form a self in at least two possible ways.

In a descriptive sense, they provide him with what and who he thinks he is as a They-Self.

The problem, though, is that he needs to take responsibility for making himself as an I-Self in order to become existentially authentic, and that requires that he properly integrates their proffered passed-on experiences as a legacy onto himself in an actualized prescriptive sense:

> Behind him the door opened and the wintry air rushed in. He turned to see, entering the door, his father, his mother, and his Aunt. It was only the presence of his aunt that shocked him, for she had never entered the church before: she seemed to have been summoned to witness a bloody act. It was in all her aspect, quiet with a dreadful quietness, as she moved down the aisle behind the mother and knelt for a moment beside his mother and father to pray. John knew that it was the hand of the Lord that had led her to this place, and his heart grew cold. The Lord was riding on the wind tonight. (60-61)

As the quote above shows prior to Part Two, "The Prayers of the Saints," the appearance of his aunt entering the church for the first time with his father and mother leads to John's sensing that God has something momentous in the air for him. John is about to take possession of his life inheritance, which involves his accepting to integrate the existential structures that his family has bequeathed to him as a gift from which he can fashion himself as *The Newly Anointed Saint*.

Moreover, when John falls onto the threshing floor, when the Holy Spirit is in the process of purging him in order to lift him up, he is also becoming *The Newly Anointed Saint* by integrating into himself the spiritual lives of the church saints. Readers can witness how he does so through his visions, which is part of the anointing process.

> And he struggled to flee—out of this darkness, out of this company—into the land of the living, so high, so far away. Fear was upon him, a more deadly fear than he had ever known, as he turned and turned in the darkness, as he moaned, and stumbled, and crawled through darkness, finding no hand, no voice, finding no door. *Who are these? Who*

are they? They were the despised and rejected, the wretched and the spat upon, the earth's offscouring; and he was in their company, and they would swallow up his soul. The stripes they had endured would scar his back, their punishment would be his, their portion his, his their humiliation, anguish, chains, their dungeon his, their death his. *Thrice was I beaten with rods, once I was stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep.*

And their dread testimony would be his! (201)

As the quote above shows, with regards to John, the case of the church saints is analogous to the life saints: they provide him with the inheritance that potentially allows him to use the life structures to make a self on two levels, the They-Self and the I-Self.

John does become a saint, but with a difference: *The Newly Anointed Saint*. Unlike the life saints of his family, Florence, Gabriel, and Elizabeth, John does not simply deal with just his own personal struggles and desires. On the threshing floor, through the visions that the Holy Spirit supplies him with, God purges John so that he can embrace his family's experiences, which includes their desires and struggles, as his inheritance, which he must freely choose to take or leave. Moreover, unlike the church saints in the narrative, the Holy Spirit works on John's experiences dialectically. Readers witness God's operating on John to ready him to do His work. We do not witness that with any other church member.

So, does Baldwin's main character, John Grimes, turn out to be existentially authentic in the Kierkegaardian sense? The answer, I admit, must be purposely put forward ambiguously: yes and no. The reason for being ambiguous, though, comes from Kierkegaard's conception of the existentially authentic: based on his works, his iteration of existential authenticity is itself unclear. Let us return to two of his renowned texts on

the subject of authenticity to make the point: *Either Or* and *Fear and Trembling*. When readers study both texts, they can come up with two basic conclusions about becoming existentially authentic: either a person can become authentic by becoming The Individual through his reaching the Religious Stage, or he can become authentic by becoming The Knight of Faith because he is willing to both sacrifice a love one and maintain a high hope through God's miraculous intervention for the return of the same love one.

Readers can, thus, conclude that John is existentially authentic in the first Kierkegaardian sense since John does reach the Religious Stage to become The Individual. However, John is not existentially authentic when considering whether he becomes a Knight of Faith. That is, if the Knight of Faith is defined by the double movement of faith, as described in *Fear and Trembling*, and succinctly defined here as "irrationally sacrificing a loved one to God and hoping for God to resurrect that same loved one," then John is not existentially authentic.

Section Three: John's Struggle with Authenticity and the African American Racial Construct

When Heidegger writes about Being in terms of his ontological study concerning what it is to be a human being in his *Being and Time*, he uses the term (Being) to refer not just to the material or abstract aspects of our humanity. No, Heidegger refers to human existence as being-in-the-world: *dasein*. For that reason, reductive philosophical studies, such as Cartesian dualistic ones, which put forward that mind and body are discrete fundamental metaphysical real substances, do not appropriately study Being.

This Heideggerian point is crucial for understanding Baldwin's account of African Americanness in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*: Being an African American is not reducible to just skin color or materiality itself. Consequently, a proper analysis of African Americans in the work involves studying situated lives since the study of John Grimes, and all the characters in the narrative, for that matter, presupposes Being-in-the-world:

> EVERYONE HAD ALWAYS SAID THAT JOHN WOULD BE A preacher when he grew up, just like his father. It had been said so often that John, without ever thinking about it, had come to believe it himself. Not until the morning of his fourteenth birthday did he really begin to think about it, and by then it was already too late. (11)

From the very outset of the narrative, as seen in the above quote, readers can see that John Grimes is a Being-in-the-world who is being an African American. This does not imply that John is racially solipsistic, though. John is very much aware of whites and their world:

> His father said that all white people were wicked, and that God was going to
> bring them low. He said that white people were never to be trusted, and that they
> told nothing but lies, and that not one of them had ever loved a nigger. He, John,
> was a nigger, and he would find out, as soon as he got a little older, how evil white
> people could be. John had read about the things white people did to colored
> people; how, in the South, where his parents came from, white people cheated
> them of their wages, and burned them, and shot them—and did worse things, said
> his father, which the tongue could not endure to utter. (36)

As the above quote shows, through his stepfather's vicious vituperation of them,

John is very much aware of whites. His stepfather is one who makes sure of that.

However, in the narrative, John does perceive whites from several perspectives: at the

very least, from his mother, his father, and himself. Of course, he does not know what to

make of all of this in the beginning of the novel. His limited experience has shown him

that at least some whites are good, and even his mother confirms that some are. For

instance, when a white woman from school gave him a bottle of cod liver oil when he was

terribly ill with a cold, his mother recognized the goodness in her: "[T]his was surely a

Christian act. His mother had said that God would bless that woman" (36). His stepfather,

on the other hand, delivers nothing but absolute condemnations of whites. So, readers can

see why John is so confused about the whole white issue.

As a result of John's existential crisis, which comes from the dread and despair he

has concerning the meaning and direction of his young life, he does appear to gravitate

towards whites for some security. He knows that they will provide him with at least three

aspects of his life that are missing from his home. First, they do acknowledge him for his

intelligence. At school, they know how bright and special he is, and for that reason, he is

affirmed. Second, his relationship with whites allows him to experience a world that is

quite different from his own. As John's trips to the wealthy streets of Manhattan show,

they seem to own all the riches of the world. Finally, John knows that they have power.

From his young perspective, they even seem to own the world, which definitely has a

certain enchantment about it:

> These glories were unimaginable—but the city was real. He stood for a
> moment on the melting snow, distracted, and then began to run down the hill,
> feeling himself fly as the descent became more rapid, and thinking: "I can climb
> back up. If it's wrong, I can always climb back up." At the bottom of the hill,
> where the ground abruptly leveled off onto a gravel path, he nearly knocked an
> old white man with a white beard, who was walking very slowly and leaning on
> his cane. They both stopped, astonished, and looked at one another. John struggled
> to catch his breath and apologized, but the old man smiled. It was as though he
> and the old man had between them a great secret; and the old man moved on. (34)

The quote above shows what John really thinks about whites and their world at

that point in the narrative: he sees them as fellow fallen sinners whom he can sympathize

with because in his wickedness and sin he can relate to them. However, the micro incident

with the white old man reflects the smiling moral ambiguity of his descent into that same

white world: for in his excitement, John imagines the white world as being full of

wonderful surprises, and like the near collision with the white old man, whom we can

easily personify as simultaneously both the traditional white bearded God and the cane

carrying devil, can clandestinely hold both heaven and hell in wait for the main character.

When the analysis, though, turns its attention to John's existential crisis, which

was initially precipitated by his perceived wickedness, his rebellion against his

stepfather, readers can see that John does see whites as a possible force to help him

oppose his stepfather: "That moment gave him, from that time on, if not a weapon, at

least a shield; he apprehended totally, without belief or understanding, that he had in

himself a power that other people lacked" (20). Is the enemy of his enemy his friend?

That is, in that context, can whites help him against his stepfather and the threatening world? So far, they do recognize John's intelligence, and for that reason, the main character is aware that he can weaponize it and them against his stepfather.

Moreover, as a newly turned fourteen-year-old, John is definitely curious about the world, which, of course, includes whites. What especially entices him to know them comes from his rebellion against his stepfather who has racially transmogrified them into a taboo. For that reason, John is told over and over again that he should never interact with them since they will see him as nothing but, as his stepfather says, "a nigger." However, curiosity is a natural human trait, especially for youths who have been given such taboos, which more often than not, morph into enticements simply because they have been forbidden in the first place:

> And certainly perdition sucked at the feet of the people who walked there: and cried in the lights, in the gigantic towers; the marks of Satan could be found in the faces of the people who waited at the doors of movie houses; his words were printed on the great movie posters that invited people to sin. It was the roar of the damned that filled Broadway, where motor cars and buses and the hurrying people disputed every inch with death. *Broadway*: the way that led to death *was* broad, and many could be found thereon; but narrow was the way that led to life eternal, and few there were who found it. But he did not long for the narrow way. (34)

As readers can see in the quote above, John is curious about this thing called the white taboo. The quote allows us to see that for John, this forbidden racial fruit is perceived to be a means of escape. That is, he can escape his stepfather's harsh and brutal world, which, at that moment he believes, demands that he accept all his stepfather's abuse and all the attendant squalor, hunger, and suffering that an austere and desiccated Christian life has to offer.

What continues to pervert John's ability to follow-up on his curiosity about whites, though, is his existential crisis. As a consequence of his inward turmoil, he does not know what to make of himself, which in itself comes from the inner tension coming from his existential inauthenticity that is complicated by his contention with his stepfather and his inchoate sexuality. These two existential impediments that get in the way of his desire to form an I-Self hinder him from forming a genuine or true perception of whites that could allow him to have a real relationship with them. Unfortunately, as already mentioned, whites simply become possible ammunition for the psycho-spiritual war he is waging against his stepfather.

Specifically, with regard to his rebellion against his stepfather, Gabriel, John's understanding of himself and his relation to the racial other (whites) is deeply impacted in mainly three ways. First, his stepfather's prohibition against trusting whites is undermined as a result of the fascination with race and color that it produces. In other words, John's struggle with his stepfather only makes him even more curious about knowing the white world. This in itself incites him to challenge the unnatural barrier of mutual hatred between blacks and whites that his stepfather has erected for him. John can now ask, since he has to ask it for himself, can blacks and whites get along? As mentioned, is the enemy of my enemy my friend?

Second, as a result of his excelling at a primarily white led school, he can rebel against his stepfather by way of his mind that is validated by whites. As the principal of his elementary school acknowledged when he was just five years old: "'You're a very bright boy, John Grimes,' she said. 'Keep up the good work'" (20). This alters his sense of being an African American in isolated opposition since as a recognized intellectual he

can reach out to whites to overcome their differences. Third, and most importantly, since it involves his stepfather's spiritual-metaphysical construct that props his Pentecostal theology condemning whites, John's rebellion against his stepfather allows him to question the actual nature of that condemnation and how whites fit into that reality.

So, when readers consider the cumulative effect of John's existential inauthenticity and its impact on his relations with whites, they need to consider the fact that his perception of them comes mainly from his own relationship with his stepfather, Gabriel. That is, despite the fact that John would naturally be curious about whites, their power in the world as expressed in the tall buildings of the city, the gorgeous actors and actresses in the movies, the supportive instructors at his school, in his existential inauthenticity, before his fall at the threshing floor, John still mainly supports his stepfather's view that whites are irredeemable sinners. For that reason, as one who has judged himself as being wicked and sinful, John can choose to rebel against his father primarily through allying himself with them.

That is part of the reason, as already mentioned, why John goes to the city to partake in all its glories: "These glories were unimaginable--" (34). He goes to the movies to watch the actors and actresses on the screen: "And then the usherette opened the doors of this dark palace and with a flashlight held behind her took him to his seat" (38). John is mainly rebelling against his stepfather.

Examining John's relationship with whites in order to understand his sense of the African American racial structure reveals that his existential inauthenticity has a tremendous impact on him there. In other words, by contrasting from the binary of white, one can understand that John mainly believes his stepfather that whites are sinners and

some blacks are saints. Again, readers can comprehend this because in order for John to consider himself as being wicked or sinful, he must sincerely believe in his stepfather's valuations, which itself is connected to his stepfather's worldview of who and what African and white Americans are.

That John struggles with his perceived wickedness (his rebellion against his father) that disturbs his sense of a They-Self (a sense of self that comes from society's construction of it) and that this disturbance of the They-Self intensifies as a result of his perceived sinfulness (his homosexual awakening) are existential complications that disturb John's striving for authenticity (developing an I-Self). John's existential crisis ("What shall I do? What shall I do?") intensifies, though, when John is overwhelmed by the weighty accumulation of existential stress factors, which ostensibly begin with his wickedness and sinfulness, and then gets aggravated by his birthday, his brother's fighting with whites, his father's slapping his mother, the pressure of being in the house of God with someone whom he loves, Elisha, and his aunt, Florence's attending church that Sunday for the first time. John is overwhelmed, and he physically falls onto the threshing floor as he spiritually leaps up to and into the Religious Stage.

John's falling onto the threshing-floor is his "Leap of Faith." It is not a "Leap of Faith" based on a Heideggerian "consciousness" defined as a "rational awareness." It is one based on a "consciousness" defined as "total mind and spirit." This is what Kierkegaard means by "Leap of Faith." It is not limited to rationality. It is not based on faith defined as blindness either, but a total embrace of God with all one's "consciousness" as a "being" with "Being," whose intensity even surpasses Heidegger's limited version of "consciousness."

Since Kierkegaard is more concerned with spirit, which for Protestants involves one's own "consciousness" and the power of God, he would not be much interested in Heidegger's limited version of the "Leap of Faith." No, Kierkegaard means more by it. John's "leap" is more than that. For that reason, readers who understand that when John "leaps" he does so from the Ethical Stage, the stage where one makes societal valuations of good and bad one's priority in life, to the Religious Stage, where one makes one's faith and relationship with God one's priority. When John "leaps," he paradoxically falls into the Holy Spirit and becomes what I have neologized as *The Newly Anointed Saint*.

When John reaches the Religious Stage, the level of existence that privileges faith over all other valuations, the analysis can demonstrate that, since he has moved beyond his stepfather's hatred through the Holy Spirit empowering him with love, his relationship with races will also be an expression of love that contradicts his stepfather's view of them. The point is that, in having Jesus or God in his life, at least the loving ecumenical Jesus he embraced in the visions he had on the threshing floor, John can love all races because Jesus loves all people.

I can further surmise that John's sense of being an African American, which is his sense of the black and white social construct itself, changes because his relationship with God changes in the Religious Stage. John's newly found faith provides for a new valuation that gives new meaning to the race constructs. In the case of African Americans, John's new-found faith would allow him to love them all, which, of course, will take him outside the province of his stepfather's church. Moreover, this will be the case for John's view about whites too. Again, one can only speculate that John is moving in that direction because of the visions he had on the threshing floor: the Holy Spirit fills

John with a Jesus centered view, which is spiritually ecumenical: "And the Holy Ghost was speaking—seeming to say, as John spelled out the so abruptly present and gigantic legend adorning the cross: *Jesus Saves*" (194).

So, when John becomes *The Newly Anointed Saint*, readers should readily know that he will more than likely give up espousing his stepfather's view that only certain African American saints are saved but the rest are irredeemably lost. Given John's vision of Jesus and love on the threshing floor, I must say that it does have an implication on race, and when one studies his threshing-floor experience, one can see that John's heart and spirit are not being moved towards his stepfather's view of humanity.

Aunt Florence is not a member of the church. Yet John's deep love for her demonstrates that he does not agree with his stepfather that she is an irredeemably lost woman. In fact, in Part Two, "The Prayer of the Saints," in spite of her experience with poverty in the South, her husband's infidelities, and her dealings with her brother's religious hypocrisy, readers know that Florence shows herself to be a person of great integrity and sensitivity, whose only salient problem is vengeful pride against those whom she perceives have hurt her: "[A]nd she wondered if she would give to Gabriel the letter that she carried in her handbag tonight. She had held it all these years, awaiting some savage opportunity" (90). John's witnessing her go to church on the day of the threshing-floor experience reveals that she is coming to God by rejecting her pride: "And she cried aloud, as she had never in all her life cried before, falling on her face on the altar" (90).

Another example that allows me to surmise that John will challenge his church, the Temple of the Fire Baptized, and his stepfather's view on race is John's experience with some helpful, or "good," white people. As mentioned in the two previous sections,

John had an exceptional experience with whites in public school who took much interest in him for his intellectual gifts. For that reason, they went out of their way to encourage him: "'You're a very bright boy, John Grimes,' she said, 'Keep up the good work'" (20). Obviously, good experiences will factor into John's transvaluation of values.

When one considers whether John's Holy Spirit experience on the threshing floor allows him to realize the existential virtues of empathy, ethics, and sociability, one can see that, even though he is just a fourteen-year old, John does succeed in beginning to develop them all, especially in relation to race. When considering empathy and race, for instance, John's threshing-floor experience allows him to consider his relationship with God beyond that of even his stepfather and the church. This should allow John to love those who are black or white and outside of the church. In addition, the Holy Spirit experience on the threshing floor allows John the possibility for developing a new criterion for ethics: "But the blood would not wash off; many washings only turned the crystal water red; and someone cried: 'Have you been to the river?'" (203). As one can see from the quote, the Holy Spirit is concerned with mercy, or unmerited forgiveness. John can direct that same mercy on the issue of race itself: through universal love, whether one is black or white, salvation is made available to all.

Finally, one can see the Holy Spirit moving John towards a new conception of sociability: "The trembling he had known in darkness had been the echo of their joyful feet—these feet, bloodstained forever, and washed in many rivers—they moved on the bloody road forever, with no continuing city, but seeking one to come: a city out of time, not made with hands, but eternal in the heaven" (204). The "one to come" is that heavenly, eternal city where Jesus's love can save all.

As I have hopefully shown, John Grimes's threshing-floor experience has changed him, but more importantly, one sees that John Grimes's sense of the African American construct changes through the continuum of his existential inauthenticity and authenticity. In his inauthenticity, when he believes himself to be wicked, because he defies his stepfather, and sinful, because he is aware of his own developing sexuality, John's sense of African Americanness is still very much based on his stepfather's worldview: only African Americans who submit themselves to God from his church can be saints. On the other hand, all African Americans who are not members of the church are damned. Even worse, whites are damned for simply being white. However, when John starts developing towards existential authenticity, when he falls and is sifted on the threshing floor and becomes The Newly Anointed Saint, John is finally able to choose his I-Self through a new ethical, empathic, and social paradigm that allows him to reconstruct his views on race in a spiritually loving way.

CONCLUSION

As detailed in the introduction of the dissertation, my purpose was to study three classic African American novels, specifically Richard Wright's *The Outsider* (1953), Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), and James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), as existential arguments in order to show whether or not each author produced his own iteration of an African American protagonist's contention for existential authenticity.

By *authenticity*, I initially adopted Heidegger's definition of the term, which *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* summed up as "The condition of those [. . .] who understand the existential structure of their lives. Heidegger held that each of us acquires an identity from our situation—our family, culture, etc. Usually, we just absorb this identity uncritically, but to let one's values and goals remain fixed without critical reflection on them is 'inauthentic'." To shorten Heidegger's distinction between the existentially authentic and inauthentic, however, I labeled the first as existentially "conscious" (I-Self) and the second as existentially "unconscious" (They-Self).

In promulgating the purpose of the dissertation in the introduction, I acknowledged that I was getting ahead of myself with regard to how I was appropriating particular major existential concepts. My point was that the existential terms that I was initially using were not as clear and distinct in meaning as they should be. For that reason, I immediately proceeded to account for the problem with the primary term *existentialism*, the term which Sartre himself declared to be seriously problematic when he pointed out that "The word is now so loosely applied to so many things in so many ways that it no longer means anything at all." Yet in the formulation of the problem, Sartre added to the

confusion. What did he mean that existentialism had no meaning? I, however, did go on to clarify what Sartre meant by disambiguating Sartre's use of the term *nothing*. That is, I studied the quote in order to show that it was not the case that existentialism meant nothing at all. It was simply the case that the term meant too much.

Acknowledging that existentialism meant too much, the study focused on Sartre's "Existence precedes essence," from his *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, as a possible resolution towards obtaining a particular tentative working definition. Three major problems cropped up, though. First, many existential philosophers repudiated such a definition. Heidegger was one who, in his "A Letter on Humanism," made the claim that if Sartre's definition was the right one, then he, Heidegger, was no existentialist.

Others also dispensed with the Sartrean definition altogether for other reasons. For instance, it was observed that prominent theistic existentialists such as Marcel, Merleau-Ponty, and Tillich had readily rejected it because of their theistic commitments to having a spiritual essence that did precede existence. Finally, the definition would rule out earlier philosophers presently identified as existentialists such as Kierkegaard and Nietzsche who never even dealt with the Sartrean distinction between existence and essence.

As a result of not being able to use the Sartrean definition, I proposed using a very general definition for existentialism: "the study of the structure, meaning, and purpose of human life." I defended the proffered definition by pointing out that it was the type that most were already familiar with when defining such terms like *biology* as "the study of life," *geology* as "the study of the earth," and *cosmology* as "the study of the universe." Even though these terms used simple general definitions, we know that when the studies

take place, the complexities of these fields concomitantly develop. The definition of existentialism should be of that type.

Having backgrounded the analysis with an appropriate tentative working definition of the term, that existentialism is "the study of the structure, meaning, and purpose of human life," I put forward that I was using it to apply to each of the analyses of the main characters of the specified three texts. I particularly mentioned that I would target each existential crisis, which I described as the main character's producing "a Munchian scream of deep anguish from dread or despair that comes from his not consciously choosing to choose freedom in his life." I continued then to explicate that I would study each existential crisis through the plot-structure of the narrative. By doing so, specifically by seeing how the existential crises fit into the conflict, I hoped that readers would understand and appreciate the existential argument for authenticity in each story.

I then put forward that I would do my analysis by mainly using a close reading. I would provide plenty of specific examples that revealed the existential argument by tracing the narrative itself. I hoped that by using such an approach that the textual analysis would move from the abstract to the concrete and that I would not make the error of simply favoring some examples that supported the argument and ignoring others that did not from the texts. I also hoped that a close reading with copious examples would allow readers to appreciate the force of the writers' works, who I recognize as masters of the novel genre.

The focus of the introduction itself turned to specifying the three works to be analyzed in the dissertation: Wright's *The Outsider*, Ellison's *Invisible Man,* and Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. The stated purpose of the dissertation was to reveal

the writers' existential arguments as they were conveyed through the plot-structures of the narratives.

When I now consider exactly how I accomplished putting forward the thesis, I submit that the major key was the *anagnorisis*, the main character's main recognition. The reason that this made it possible is that the main recognition expresses the protagonist's main understanding that takes the existential crisis into account. In this way, one can discern the *anagnorisis* as an overlap, or intersection, between the existential meaning and the plot-structure form of the narrative. For instance, in Wright's *The Outsider*, the main recognition is "'Man is a promise that cannot be broken.'" Readers can see here that the main character, Cross Damon, has come to the understanding that in order to make oneself existentially, one needs "to consciously commit to actualizing a plan for one's life."

In Ellison's *Invisible Man*, the main recognition is "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you." In that case, readers can see that the main character, the anonymous narrator, realizes that in making a self, one needs "to be aware that one may be producing a first-person I that communicates a making or fashioning of a second-person you, who then becomes an aspect of the existential being involving both a you and an I." Finally, in Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, the main recognition comes from the main character's visionary experience of an ecumenically loving Jesus on the threshing-floor that escapes a simple verbal formulation. In that case, readers can see that the main character, John Grimes, realizes Jesus's transvaluation of his sin so that he may move on and upward to preaching the actual gist of God's mission: love. So, in each of

the three works, the resolution of the existential crisis coincides with the major moment, or point, of the plot-structure of the narrative that one can identify as the *anagnorisis*.

I admit, though, that by using a general descriptive approach I avoided two major kinds of possible inconsistencies that a prescriptive approach would have necessarily formed. The first has to do with existentialism itself. In putting together such an eclectic set of existential thoughts from mainly Heidegger, Sartre, and Kierkegaard, one would have no choice but to throw out unity and coherence, if one attempts to conceptually reconcile them. The second possible type of inconsistency would involve the thoughts of the writers themselves: Wright, Ellison, and Baldwin. These writers do not conform to any consistent existential theory promulgated by any of the existential philosophers, and for that reason, I permitted the writers to express their own particular versions of existentialism.

Existential questions are perennial. When one realizes that, then one knows that the "African American Existential Heroes: Narrative Struggles for Authenticity" is a topic that has hardly been touched. How would such a topic work with texts produced prior to the existential movement itself? How would they fare for texts produced after the Cold War? What about African America genres such slave narratives, biographies, or Afrofuturism? Would it work for them? As long as humans are humans and as long as the African American construct endures, then I believe the existential will itself exist.

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