The Myth of Sisyphus in Richard Wright’s Native Son

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Abstract
The identification of archetypes in literary texts follows the path of deep structural analysis, as surface reading will dwell ordinarily at the level of incidents. This research is driven by the configuration of the myth of Sisyphus in Richard Wright’s Native Son. Our claim is that the myth figures in the text as a shade of the crime and punishment sequence, with an absurdist twist. This claim is substantiated following the archetypal literary theory, which employs to a great extent the methods of discourse analysis. The novel has often been read along the ideological questions that racism raises and attempts to answer. This essay marks a deviation from that seemingly jaundiced view of literature. What this essay foregrounds is the eternal regeneration of narratives, an eternalness that bears the nature of the archetype in its repetitiveness. This necessitates the choice of archetypal literary criticism as the theory for this research. To reach its conclusions, this article adopts a qualitative approach, taking its data from the events in the novel, and investigating the mythic orientations at work in the novel, with the view that at the forefront of this is the myth of Sisyphus, a shade of the myth of crime and punishment. This article does not account for the sociocultural frame of racism as a material but understands it in the wider conception of myth, as a figuration of the Sisyphian myth which shares with the racism in the text the quality of perpetuity or seeming endlessness. We show that racism is in this akin to the sufferings and struggles of Sisyphus, that it is Sisyphian.

Keywords
myth, Sisyphus, suffering, struggle, tragedy, archetype, fall, rock/boulder, racism

Introduction
The existence of a literary tradition renders the notion of world literature interpretable, which is why for Roman Jakobson, “the object of the science of literature is not literature but literariness—that is that which makes a given work a work of literature” (Akwanya, 2017, p. 56). The idea here is that everything that qualifies to the name of literature must first be able to conform to a particular form which renders it essential as such. It must be able to hold its existence amid similar existents and maintain its claim to literariness, that is, having certain features that consolidate its claim to literature. This basically is the question of literature and criticism. What is? As we read in Akwanya (2017), “it would appear to mean that every reading proceeds by preliminarily tackling the question, what kind of text is this: a literary work or a text of another kind?” (p. 55). The basic unity in finding a measure of judgment gives literature a touch of the scientific, it makes criticism a science, with standards that are replicable as scientific laws, to the point that “to interpret a text is not to give it a . . . meaning but on the contrary to appreciate what plural constitutes it” (Barthes, 1990, p. 5).

Barthes’s “plural” calls up the notion of archetype which implies repeated patterns of occurrences in literature, otherwise called mythic sequences. There are such mythical sequences as “crime and punishment, quest sequence, knowledge seeker, the year god, the rough beast, mistaken identities and the pharmakos” (Akwanya, 2015, p. 3), and if we know our discipline better, we might add the Sisyphean sequence. The myth of Sisyphus is a tragic myth; in Camus’s reinterpretation, it is absurdist. It follows the crime and punishment sequence, and takes up an absurdist twist that presupposes not just a punishment but one that is in itself seemingly endless, as it is the effect of a crime that in the nature of crimes cannot be obliterated. Sisyphus is punished with eternally rolling a heavy rock up the hill from whence it rolls down and he has to carry out the same task, repeatedly. Thus, in this research, attempt is not made to account for racism as an ideological tenet. It holds rather that racism is interpretable as a mythic symbol which is Sisyphean in orientation. This essay foregrounds the eternal regeneration of narratives

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(Eliade, 1971), an eternalness that bears the nature of the archetypal figure of Sisyphus. Bigger’s reading also implicates the system of racism that defines his existence, as he cannot exist outside it. This seeming unfreedom is traditional of these kinds of heroes as we shall find out. Bigger is, after all, “a symbol, a test symbol” (Wright, 1940, p. 298), as his lawyer interprets him, one that represents the whole dynamics of racial relations in the novel. He struggles with his being, with the question of being, and turns up in the end as a man that he himself can hardly recognize or come to terms with. He clings to a meaningless existence, nor can life make sense for him. Bigger’s “supreme act” (Wright, 1940, p. 218) is a revolt against the Sisyphean system. But we find that even this obviously serious revolt does not leave any promise. By the time we get to the end of the text things are still as they are, only that a man has committed a crime for which he is punished. However, it is this ability to be which is important for us, even the ability to be a criminal in a system that blockades every possibility of being. This defiance also marks him out as Sisyphian. Studies on the text have largely focused on racism as an ideological tenet. Here, we refocus the text within the lens of the archetypal and identify some recurrent patterns that make it readable as a representation of the myth of Sisyphus. This establishes a place for Wright’s text in the literary tradition.

Richard Wright’s *Native Son* appears to be an overworked text, but if Frye’s assertion about the nature of literary art is valid then it leaves the literary object a perpetual symbol of thought, ever calling attention to itself. The text thus becomes the field of unending contestation. Many research papers have been written on Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, but they are largely sociocultural appraisals that attend to the work solely at the level of incidents, the basic one being the politics of race. They exist also a number of critical papers concerning the novel as tragedy. But if the work of art subsists in Frye’s inexhaustibility (*Anatomy of Criticism*, Frye, 1957, p. 27), it would appear that reading the novel receives here an entirely new dimension to the existing research works on the novel. This article undertakes a reading of the novel with the establishment of the myth of Sisyphus as the particular tragic myth at work in the text. The article adopts as a shade of the Sisyphean Camus’s philosophy of absurdism as popularized in his *Myth of Sisyphus and Other Readings*. Our claim in this reading is that the myth of Sisyphus is a representation of the mimesis of struggle, and has as its basic primary symbol suffering, Bigger being for us the figure who suffers and struggles. But, that he suffers is a consequence of his existence, nor can he do otherwise. He suffers because he exists. Like Sisyphus, his fate seems to be a machination of the greater existences: overwhelming, trenchant, and inescapable. The fact of seeing the novel with the myth of Sisyphus as the critical lens is peculiar to this research. It fills, in this sense, a gap in scholarship as no existing research has viewed the text along this line of thought.

This study will be a worthwhile contribution to the discipline of literary criticism. It is also an added study to the existing studies on Richard Wright’s *Native Son*. The two achievements above point us to the claim that the novel is more serious than the trivializing critical acclaim of sociological critics who constantly seek to reduce the text to a documentary on American racism, probably a way of telling such stories as that of George Janus.

**Tragedy and the Absurd**

Perhaps more than anyone else, Albert Camus (1942) is credited with the basic elaborate analysis of the concept of the absurd. Following Camus, we find correlates between the mythical figure of Sisyphus, the philosophical movement of the absurd, and tragedy. It is within Sisyphus’s punishment and his attitude toward it that we meet the existential notion of absurdism in this Greek king, hence his tragedy. Of [Sisyphus’s] punishment and suffering, Camus (1942) writes,

> The gods had condemned Sisyphus to ceaselessly rolling a rock to the top of a mountain, whence the stone would fall back of its own weight. They had thought with some reason that there is no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labor. (p. 75)

Camus locates no escape or freedom, not even in suicide or transcendence, only an escape into the self. His view of the hero is of one who comes to accept his reality as his fate, though he is not consulted and in fact has no choice in deciding what constitutes his fate. His version of the hero finds fulfillment in his experience even though this might be tragic in a sense. He is “cheerful” (Sewall, 1980). Thus, “one must imagine Sisyphus happy” because he “is superior to his fate [and] stronger than his rock” (Camus, 1942, pp. 77–78). This sense of being stronger than fate comes from the mind’s ability to navigate the bounds of the absurd. Knowing that all life is absurd, Camus’s kind of hero excels by acceptance. He comes to accept his fate and thus lives happily in spite of the awareness that that life he lives is absurd.

Accordingly,

> Foley imagines that even if the gods gave Sisyphus a new heavy rock, he can defy. He can refuse. He can say no. Or rather in arrogance and humility, rebellion and acceptance, absurdity and happiness, with a loving slap “This is my rock.” (Verhoeft, 2014, p. 9)

The Sisyphian hero has this sense of being stronger than his fate. In this case, the Sisyphian hero is a tragic hero. We
recognize Sisyphus’s oxymoronic fate from Foley’s imagination above; and this accentuates his tragedy as he is plagued with absurdity and happiness, happy within the absurd, fulfilled in his never-ending journey. Thus, Sisyphus reveals the reaction of the tragic hero, a man who is accounted to be “more than man” (*King Oedipus* L.31).

The myth of Sisyphus thus implicates tragedy. Aristotle (1998) distinguishes between the art form which presents men as better than they are in real life (tragedy) and that which presents men as worse than they are in real life (comedy). For the classicist, “tragedy is the sense of ancient evil, of the blight man was born for, of the permanence of the mystery of human suffering, that is basic to the tragic sense of human life” (Sewall, 1980, p. 6). We read in Akwanya (1998) that

> Sewall follows Karl Jaspers in locating the tragic function in the boundary situation where one is confronted by the deepest questions of existence; what does it mean to be, or as Lear frames it, “who is it that can tell me who I am?” . . . The result is that discovery becomes the central issue of tragedy. (p. 26)

This is the view of Brown and Kimmey when they explain tragedy in terms of “the imaginative reflection of man in conflict with himself and his world for the sake of achieving wisdom or love or recognition of his place in the scheme of things” (Akwanya, 1998, p. 26). Thus, “the action need not be serious in itself as in Aristotle’s prescription, but is made serious by self-knowledge issuing from it” (Akwanya, 1998, p. 29). With Jaspers’s boundary situation, we are dealing with constraints within the world of the text. It figures like Camus’s theory of the absurd in that this case, the hero is brought to a full confrontation with the forces that threaten to annihilate him and must win one way or another, even if he wins by losing. Thus,

> clearly the analysis of the boundary situation, how the character reacts to it and what it does to him is a more promising path to an understanding of tragedy, in that in this case we are dealing with issues that are representable as part of the action itself, rather than with the calculation of effects. (Akwanya, 1998, p. 30)

The boundary can be figured from such constraints as confront Bigger in the text of Wright’s *Native Son*. With Jaspers’s boundary situation, we are squarely in the world of the text. The hero’s attitude to the boundary situation determines whether he is a tragic hero or another kind of hero. This account of tragedy based on the boundary situation is slightly different from Northrop Frye’s account where “the tragic hero has to be of a properly heroic size, but his fall is involved both with a sense of his relation to society and with a sense of the supremacy of natural law” (Frye, 1957, p. 36). It does appear, however, that this sense of supremacy, what Nietzsche has called the “overman,” (1995) eggs the hero on until and after he crosses the just boundaries of individualization, leading ultimately to his fall. As we read,

> Man is something to be surpassed . . . Man is a rope stretched between animal and overman—a rope over an abyss. A dangerous crossing, a dangerous on-the-way, a dangerous looking back, a dangerous trembling and stopping. What is great in man is that he is a bridge and not a goal: what can be loved in man is that he is an over-going and a down-going. (Nietzsche, 1995, pp. 13–15)

This explains why for Gilbert Murray, the hero is typically an individual fused with “a quality of soul that can conquer death” (Murray, 1940, p.5) This explains why for Gilbert Murray, the hero is typically an individual fused with “a quality of soul that can conquer death” (Murray, 1940, p.5)

Thus, Bigger Thomas, the protagonist of Richard Wright’s phenomenal novel, figures for us as a tragic hero, the one who makes “the attempt to transcend the curse of individuation[,]” (Nietzsche, 2000, p. 72), “commits a sacrilege, and suffers, nonetheless cheerful” (Sewall, 1980, p. 52). Thus, we see in Bigger Thomas an image of “the Dionysian man [who] resembles Hamlet for whom “to be or not to be [] is the question” (Shakespeare,1599/1973, 3.1.64): they have all looked into the essence of things, they have gained knowledge. Bigger Thomas takes with ‘grim equanimity . . . the punishment that is his apparently for being who he is” (Akwanya, 1998, p. 35). Thus, even though he is primarily driven by fear, Bigger amounts to something in his nothingness. Bigger, like Hamlet contemplating suicide, but unlike Shakespeare’s eponymous character finds no rescue in it. He follows Hamlet’s first option: “to take arms against a sea of troubles, and by opposing end them” (Shakespeare,1599/1973,3.1.66-67).

Joyce Ann (1986) attempts a critique of the work as tragedy, pointing out that “it is not Wright’s experiences that are highlighted when we read *Native Son*, but Bigger’s” (p. 13). Ann succeeds largely because of her method which recognizes the autonomy of the text. She treats Bigger as a preordained character who must, however, suffer as a result of his hubris. Ann’s essay attempts to disentangle the text from the competing sociological interpretations of it as a representation of American racism; she sees it in its totality as Bigger’s story of existence which is primally tragic. She is of the view that “*Native Son* is a tragedy according to traditional definitions” and explores “Wright’s most successful language to show how his language merges with the subject matter to illuminate *Native Son* as a tragedy” (Ann, 1986, pp. 11–12).

Another critique asserts the place of the novel as tragedy against Foley’s argument that *Native Son* is an apologue (Ramandanovic, 2003). Foley names pity for—and identification with—the tragic hero the crux of tragedy. Ramandanovic refutes Foley’s claim, stating that “*Native Son* is in fact a tragedy” (Ramandanovic, 2003, p. 84). He, like Ann, locates the text within the classical tradition of tragedy. His essay stresses fatalism. For him, therefore,

> what matters concerning the tragedy of Bigger Thomas is that Bigger has an ate (Greek for fate). That, to put it simply, he is
driven or fated to commit a crime, to become a colored man and to die in the electric chair. (p. 85)

The notion that Thomas is fated is present throughout the novel and is brought to the fore after Bigger is arrested in the third part of the novel, aptly titled Fate. For Ramandanovic, Bigger triumphs at the end because he accepts that he is driven by a force, by an Até. He also claims that “the audience only has to recognize that the character suffers because of who he has become (not because of what he has done)” (Ramandanovic, 2003, p. 86). The stressing of who he has become in negation of the act of the tragic hero indicates recognition of what he amounts to as a tragic hero; he is always “innocent and guilty.” But what he amounts to will be better figured as polar axis of the crime and punishment sequence, what he has done always ultimately leading to what he has become. What he has become is the result of what he has done, and so, as in every case, the result has within it several variables; in this case the crime is contained within the punishment, the two actually being one dyad. The tragic hero is to a large extent unaware of the workings of his fate. He is simply involved in a struggle and he thinks he will win even until his final defeat. Thus, he is a fated individual with plenty of faith.

There are other critics who have also argued that the character of Bigger is privileged with “sightedness.” Sightedness as they see it is a position of privilege in a seemingly blind world. Bigger’s sightedness is in fact placed side by side with the blindness of the system and its principal actors. This is the view of Onunkwo et al. (2017) who assert that

Bigger Thomas has already seen himself as privileged, not in the form of social hierarchy, but in the sense of the physical and mental capability of sightedness - over everyone else in the world of Native Son. He begins first by contemplating the literal blindness of Mrs Dalton, and then correlates Mrs Dalton’s blindness to the condition of vision of the rest of the characters, and in his thought concluding that they too are blind. (p. 1)

We find that for Onunkwo et al. above, Bigger is the privileged character, although the surface reader might want to claim that he is “underprivileged, less privileged, or handicapped.” Their sense of privilege is in line with our idea of the hero who finds fulfillment in his sufferings, who has come to accept his sufferings as a privilege. What Bigger enjoys in their reading is the privilege of sight, as opposed to the blindness of those around him. Therefore, our ability to see Bigger is premised on his possession of “a secret knowledge,” a sense of sightedness. Bigger is able to stand outside of himself for the first time after the murder: “he has truly looked into the essence of things, he has gained knowledge” (Onunkwo et al., 2017, p. 2).

Native Son is a novel written in the spirit of the protest tradition. And there is a sense in which Sisyphus is a protest character. In Camus, we see that absurdity is spelt out by his questioning of the drab routine of ordinary human existence. An existence that leads all ultimately to protest is the kind that we meet in such text as Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin. And as we see in James Baldwin (1949), “the protest novel, so far from being disturbing, is an accepted and comforting aspect of the American scene, ramifying that framework we believe to be so necessary . . .” (p. 1).

Accordingly, Tim M. Ipema (1990) asserts that there are two great American effective protest novels—Uncle Tom’s Cabin and Native Son. Baldwin (1949) establishes a relatedness between the two texts. His view is that “Wright’s and Stowe’s protest mirror each other [and] the two main characters of these two novels . . . share this similarity: each is a solution to his author’s protest” (Baldwin, 1949, pp. 5–6). For us in this critique, Bigger is a protest figure inasmuch as he struggles against the system of racism. The system is his rock. And his struggles against it constitute the single most important reason for our understanding of him as Sisyphus.

The myth of Sisyphus necessarily traverses the paths of the crime and punishment sequence. By the time we encounter Sisyphus, he has attempted to trick death or the gods, a crime for which he is punished. Thus, there is the necessary mythic semblance that exists between Dostoyevsky’s Crime and Punishment and Richard Wright’s Native Son. We find that Bigger is very much like Raskolnikov. As Stanton (1969) shows, the works are closely related, stating that “Dostoyevsky’s Crime and Punishment, Mallamud’s The Assistant and Wright’s Native Son all center upon crime and the moral regeneration of the criminal, in a world where God’s will is no longer evident” (Stanton, 1969, p. 1). His argument is that

Internally, Native Son is much more similar to Crime and Punishment than is The Assistant. Both Native Son and Crime and Punishment are set in slums and have atmospheres heavy with poverty, oppression, shame and frustration. Each protagonist - Raskolnikov and Bigger - is fatherless, ashamed of the suffering of his family and practically incapacitated by his own psychic misery. . . In each novel the second murder is necessitated by the first, and its victim is even more oppressed than the protagonist. (Stanton, 1969, p. 2)

He also makes the claim that “for Bigger, morality is not a mode of action, but a prison” (Stanton, 1969, p. 6). This study focuses on establishing the claim that Mallamud and Wright are extensions of the Dostoevskyan tradition. This is in line with our adoption of the archetypal frame. We find, for example, that the image of “prison” which Stanton’s comment above calls up is a shade of the unfreedom that life is for Sisyphus and—by extension—Bigger.

Perhaps the most readily available discourse formative on criticism of Native Son is racism. But the current study finds that racism is not a mere sociopolitical and ideological tenet. It is read here to be a tragic formative that is Sisyphian, such that like the persona in Kofi Awoonor’s “Songs of Sorrow” laments, . . . When I clean it cannot go” (L7). It is in this sense that we describe it as Sisyphian as it shares with the
nature of Sisyphus’s punishment the quality of perpetuity, and shares in the metaphor of prison pointed out above. Accordingly, racism in the text figures as an eternal evil. This is what Camus names the absurd, that repetitiveness with the quality of the eternal which he factors into life in the real. However, it should be pointed out that the tragedy in the text follows from Bigger’s questioning of the system. He gains by this act the status of the outsider who must be removed for society to function, a good man maybe, like Baako (Armah, 1974). It is equally by asking “why?” that the hero marks himself out as “the one world being” (Nietzsche, 2000, p. 71). As Camus (1955) puts it,

> It happens that the stage sets collapse. Rising, streetcar, four hours in the office or the factory, meal, streetcar, four hours of work, meal, sleep, and Monday Tuesday Wednesday Thursday Friday and Saturday according to the same rhythm—this path is easily followed most of the time. But one day the “why” arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement. (p. 10)

This study adopts the archetypal literary theory. The point that the essay raises by this choice of theory thus is the shared significances between texts in the literary tradition across all cultures and generations. This article proves in line with the text of Richard Wright’s *Native Son* that the myth at work in it is tied to the existential narrative of Sisyphus who is himself the figure in whose shadow Bigger is cast. The theory of archetypal criticism arguably traces its recent widespread usage to the Canadian critic, Northrop Frye (1957, 2002), who argues that archetype implies the recurrence of patterns in poetry. Thus, as Frye posits, archetypal literary theory is “that mode of criticism which treats the poem not as an imitation of nature but as an imitation of other poems [and] studies conventions and genres and the kind of recurrent imagery which connect one poem with another” (Frye, 1954, p. 616).

**The Configuration of Sisyphus in Native Son**

The Sisyphean man is involved in a struggle and knows he might not win. Paradoxically, this does not deter the hero. He has the attitude of Oedipus who cries out: “despite so many ordeals, my advanced age and the nobility of my soul make me conclude that all is well,” like Dostoyevsky’s Kirilov (*The Possessed*), who tells us in the midst of suffering and imminent death by suicide, “all is well.” We read from Camus (1955), “before terminating in blood an indescribable spiritual adventure, Kirilov makes a remark as old as human suffering: ‘All is well’” (p. 69). That all is well completes the career of the hero. But there is a little bit of difference between such absurd theorists as Kierkegaard and Camus. The first believes in the leap of faith, while for Camus

> the absurd becomes nothingness when it encounters the realm of the spiritual world, or, the spheres of faith, because the individual has transcended Sisyphus’ perpetual act of rolling a rock up a hill only to watch it fall back down and then having to push it up again. (Roskowski, 2013, pp. 17–18)

It is Camus who provides the model for Bigger Thomas. Thus, for Bigger,

> He saw and felt but one life, and that one life was more than a sleep, a dream; life was all life had. He knew that he would not wake up sometime later, after death, and sigh at how simple and foolish his dream had been. The life he saw was short and his sense of it goaded him. (Wright, 1940, p. 283)

He comes to believe, “what I killed for I am” (p. 326). This implies acceptance of his fate and place in the universe, a place that does not hold any elixir nor promise of peace. Bigger’s existence in the text as such shows him to be a man haunted on all fronts. But he does not stop believing. This is the basis of his figuration as Sisyphus.

The symbolism of the rat chase occurring in the beginning of the sequence offers us a glimpse into the kind of haunted life that Bigger experiences. Like the rat he is involved in a struggle to survive as every member of his family. His life is of course imagined in the short unfree existence of the rat. Bigger is poor, Black, and disadvantaged. But these are not simply what qualifies him for the reading he receives here as Sisyphus; this reading is grounded rather on what the novel vaguely names his “supreme act.” The supreme act is not the murder per say, nor his death; it is the totality of what this sums up to mean for Bigger Thomas and the Black community:

> Having been thrown by an accidental murder into a position where he had sourced a possible order and meaning in his relations; having accepted the moral guilt and responsibility for that murder because it had made him, feel free for the first time in his life; having felt in his heart some obscure need to be at home with people and having demanded ransom money to enable him to do it—having done all this and failed, he chose not to struggle anymore. With a supreme act of will springing from the essence of his being, he turned away from his life and the long train of disastrous consequences that had flowed from it and looked wistfully upon the dark face of ancient waters upon which some spirit had breathed and created him, the dark face of the waters from which he had been first made in the image of a man, with a man’s obscure need and urge; feeling that he wanted to sink into those waters and rest eternally. (Wright, 1940, p. 218)

Bigger appears physically hemmed in long before the murder, when we read of his experience during his first visit to the Daltons: “He held his breath; it seemed that there was not room enough for him to pass without actually touching her” (Wright, 1940, p. 75). Bigger is involved in a struggle with social conventions, and the “recognition of the existence of the social conventions and boundaries is at once the acknowledgement that his energy, passion and so on cannot have free play” (Akwanya, 2005, 219). Akwanya’s claim in the above is that the hero attempts to negotiate his freedom amidst stifling unfreedom.
It is this movement of unfreedom that dominates his short existence with the White world, and even his life with his Black family. He is always crammed in by fear, until “he wanted to move from the bed, but was afraid . . . Frantically, he caught a corner of the pillow and brought it to her lips . . .” (Wright, 1940, p. 117). What is found is that his murder of Mary is purely an act of necessity, to keep from being discovered, his presence at that hour being already taboo. Thus, “he had to stop her from mumbling, or he would be caught” (Wright, 1940, p. 117). It is a choice between being caught across the lines or evading the eyes of the White world. This is what Bigger’s life in totality sums up to an apprenticeship in the art of pretense and make-believe. It would appear that Mary has been killed by an act of the white blur, acting with black fear, the blur being what places Bigger in that position where he cannot help but act in the manner he does. Thus, her body is stilled following the stillness of the white blur (Mrs. Dalton): “the white blur was still . . . Her [Mary’s] body was still” (Wright, 1940, p. 117). Mrs. Dalton, cast in the image of the white blur (like her cat) in the scene above, becomes the symbolic representation of White racism, the system against which Bigger (symbol of the oppressed Black) struggles to no avail, a system that like the “Big Brother” presence in Orwell’s 1984, stalks every point of the individual’s life, like the haunting image of the white cat seen on the night of the murder, a way of saying, again, “Big Brother is watching. There is no escaping this fate!” It is in this sense that it is fatal and Sisyphean, in its perpetuity. Bigger is beyond Blackness and Whiteness. He is a fusion of these two worlds. He indicates the struggle that goes on between them. He becomes their symbolic battleground.

Again, Bigger’s symbolic essence, which we glimpse from Marx pronouncement on him as “a symbol, a test symbol” (Wright, 1940, p. 298), comes to mean that he is more than a human character. He is a type, the archetypal Black man, the symbol of suffering without rest or reprieve, and struggle. He is a Sisyphean symbol. Thus, like Sisyphus, one can imagine Bigger happy, or as Sewall puts it, cheerful. He does not mind that he seems to achieve nothing, and that he is seemingly “nothing from nowhere . . . .” Sisyphus understands that his task is riddling, with a logic all its own. But he decides to follow through, nor can he decide otherwise. His existence seems already to have been long decided even before he existed, a reference to the matter in Oedipus Rex indicating the involvement of the fates in the affairs of mortals, in every facet of their life.

Bigger tragically faces up with what must come and is most of all cheerful, a cheerfulness which we find in the spurts of excitement that grip him from time to time following the murder of Mary, the hope of a life that counts. And even if he cannot achieve that, he can laugh because for the first time he has been able to make the White folk feel what he has felt all his life, even if for a fleeting moment. He could truly see himself for the first time, even if it is his worthless-ness that he sees. This threatens to unsettle his sensibilities, and Bigger Thomas becomes by this an existential character who struggles in vain to make meaning of his life, to as much as possible assert his humanity, to free himself from such as his mother’s “no-countest-man” (Wright, 1940, p. 17) definition. But all his efforts prove futile, and he no longer aspires to freedom or escape. He finds his freedom within the bounds of his existence, his reality. Escape is not one of the options that he might take because he is in his unfreedom an absurd hero whose role in this particular configuration is couched within the tragic form. As we read,

He was alone in the kitchen now. Again the thought that he had the chance to walk out of here and be clear of it all came to him, and again he brushed it aside. He was tensely eager to stay and see how it would all end, even if that end swallowed him in blackness. He felt that he was living upon a high pinnacle where bracing winds whipped about him . . . (Wright, 1940, p. 219)

The image of pinnacle makes his fall more dramatic, such that we can by this think of his high position in the sense that Aristotle thought of the hero of tragedy, while keeping in mind Arthur Miller’s modern redefinition of tragedy which gives even the common man a high place if he is ready to give in his all. The image brings to mind the mention of pinnacle during the temptations of the Christian Jesus. It is from this pinnacle that we can clearly see his fall, especially as he constantly blots out chances of his escape. He is aware that he could run away; he could remain; he could even go down and confess what he had done. The mere thought that these avenues of action were open to him made him feel free, that his life was his, that he held his future in his hands . . . (Wright, 1940, p. 220)

Thus, we find that Bigger locates his freedom within his unfreedom. He hides under the façade that “they would never think that he had done it; not a meek black boy like him” (Wright, 1940, p. 220). He decides to stay and see how it would all end, and rejects any freedom but that within the bounds of his fate. His fate, on the contrary, is absurd, drab, and void of promises. We find that he suffers restlessly. So that, as we read,

Things were happening so fast that he felt he was not doing full justice to them. He was tired. Oh, if only he could go to sleep! If only this whole thing could be postponed for a few hours, until he had rested some! He felt that he would have been able to handle it then. Events were like the details of a tortured dream, happening without cause. At times it seemed that he could not quite remember what had gone before and what it was he was expecting to come. (Wright, 1940, p. 229)

His life is moving in so fast a pace that one can imagine him restless. He is turning in vicious circles of suffering. For Bigger, there is no rest or respite. His only respite is that which happens strictly in his head, within himself. He is like Sisyphus, condemned to a task steeped in perpetuity,
like Prometheus whose liver is eaten by the night bird, only
to grow all again during the day and be eaten at night again,
repeatedly. Bigger’s claim “that his life was his, that he
held his future in his hand” (Wright, 1940, p. 160) is akin to
what Foley imagines Sisyphus says to someone giving him
another rock, another task, “no . . . this is my rock” (Wright,
1940, p. 227). He rejects the option of another life, of
another choice.

The Fall Motif
Gilbert Muray outlines the hero to be an individual with a
“quality of soul that can conquer death” (Murray, 1940,
p.196). Bigger’s fall follows the falling action of the novel,
after the climax, appropriately. It is at the point of the climax
that we are first introduced to the image of fall in the meta-
phor of “pinnacle,” where “he felt that he was living upon a
high pinnacle where bracing winds whipped about him”
(Wright, 1940, p. 160). Soon after this experience, we follow
Bigger’s physical leap from the height of his fears to a posi-
tion where he feels safe, but as it is the fate of an absurd hero,
his fate is akin to Sisyphus’s rock that rolls down, again and
again, an implication of the myth of fall found across several
mythologies, a myth that is completed in a rise. Fall follows
or is followed by a rise. This is the figure of the seasons:
autumn and fall, the logic of seed time and harvest, the rela-
tionship between life and death, the understanding that death
is never final but keeps a close affiliation with life. Bigger
stands outside himself and observes his fall, and it would
appear that there is nothing he could have done to avert his
eventual collapse into oblivion as every action inevitably
leads him to this tragic fate. He is in this like Oedipus. He as
well shares in this drab fate with such classical figures as
Sisyphus whose boulder rolls down by a foreordained decree
of the gods acting with the slope. Hence, for Bigger, “events
were like the details of a tortured dream, happening without
cause” (Wright, 1940, p. 168). But he at some point seems to
have mastered his feelings, as we read:

Though he had killed by accident, not once did he feel the need
to tell himself that it had been an accident. He was black and he
had been alone where a white girl had been killed; therefore he
had killed her . . . He had killed many times before, only on
those other times, there had been no handy victim of circumstance
to make visible or dramatic his will to kill. His crime felt natural.
He felt that all of his life had been leading to something like this.
(Wright, 1940, p. 136)

Thus, he comes down with a “terrified pride in feeling and
thinking that someday he would be able to say publicly that
he had done it. It was as though he had an obscure but deep
debt to fulfill to himself in accepting the deed” (Wright,
1940, p. 94). The oxymoron here (terrified pride) is emblem-
atic of the divide that bedevils Bigger’s personality. At once
terrified and proud, Bigger becomes a conflict of wills. He is
thus a struggling individual who finds fulfillment within his
struggle, a sense of the Sisyphian, of the absurd and the
tragic. As a result of this first physical murder, Bigger’s exist-
ence attains expression for the first time. He finds satisfac-
tion and happiness. While waiting for his breakfast at home
that morning of the murder we read, “Now, who on earth
would think that he a black, timid Negro boy, would murder
and burn a rich white girl and would sit and wait for his
breakfast like this! Elation filled him” (Wright, 1940, p.
137). When he meets with former gang mate, G.H., “he was
trembling with excitement; sweat was on his forehead. He
was excited and something was compelling him to become
more excited. It was like a thirst springing from his blood”
(Wright, 1940, p. 141). It is at points like these that we iden-
tify Bigger’s supreme act to be the murder and the possibili-
ities it opens up for him. He recognizes the act as his own. It
seems, however, that his Blackness is the mark of his fate,
the tether that binds him eternally to the tragic sense of life.
But he has the choice of escape which he does not make, and
this in turn qualifies him for the consideration he gets here as
a tragic hero, the one who takes a chance and loses. Thus,

He was following a strange path into a strange land and his nerves
were hungry to see where it led . . . He could take a streetcar to the
railway station and leave town . . . No; it would be far better to
stick it out and see what happened. (Wright, 1940, p. 143)

The choice to stick it out and see what happened is the kind
that Oedipus makes, the definitive choice of all tragic heroes.
It is the kind that Sisyphus makes too. It is removed from
taking a streetcar to a railway station and leaving town.
Bigger instead finds anchor in his crime, as “his crime was
an anchor weighing him safely in time; it added to him a
certain confidence which his gun and knife did not . . . He
had done something which even he had not thought possible”
(Wright, 1940, p. 135). So, Bigger literally astounds himself.
He achieves the seemingly impossible: crushing the symbol
of beauty of the White world, the young charming daughter
of a feudal lord and finds the justification for his act in the act
itself. “He felt that his murder of her was more than amply
justified by the shame she had made him feel” (Wright, 1940,
p. 100).

From the foregoing, we find that Bigger stands out from
Bessie and the rest of his family by his realization and
response. He acts differently from his mother who would not
assume the full weight of her existence. Bigger assumes that
weight, and still feels that “hope was always waiting some-
where deep down in him” (Wright, 1940, p. 145). He hopes
even against hope, a hope that he places only in himself,
ever adopting the transcendental. He sticks it out like
Sisyphus involved in the task of rolling up the boulder.
However, just when he reaches the top in the sterling achieve-
ment of the murder, Bigger is soon led to reason, “God! The
whole world was tumbling down” (Wright, 1940, p. 250),
and in this instance, we are reminded of Sisyphus’s boulder
imagistically cascading down the mount or hill. Soon we see that it is Bigger himself who is tumbling down:

He leaped, headlong, sensing his body twisting in the icy air as he hurtled. His eyes were shut and his hands were clenched as his body turned, sailing through the snow. He was in the air a moment; then he hit. (p. 251)

From this point on, Bigger is fighting for his life; he is confronted from all sides, until he is eventually cordoned off. At the point where he rapes Bessie we see another seeming vision of fall:

And then the wind became so strong that it lifted him high into the dark air, turning him, twisting him, hurling him; faintly, over the wind’s howl, he heard don’t Bigger don’t don’t. At a moment he could not remember, he had fallen; and now he lay, spent, his lips parted. (Wright, 1940, p. 264)

For Bigger, however, we figure that the fall is not final. Bigger shares in the pride of Sisyphus, his crime fills him with a sense of pride, even though he does feel spent:

And yet, out of it all, over and above all that had happened, impalpable but real, there remained to him a queer sense of power; he had done this. He had brought all this about. In all his life these two murders were the most meaningful things that had ever happened to him . . . Never had he had the chance to live out the consequences of his actions; never had his will been so free as in this night and day of fear and murder and flight. (Wright, 1940, p. 197)

Bigger does not regard his fall with a sense of loss. Rather, “He had to wait and see. He had to have faith. He had to trust himself; that was all” (Wright, 1940, p. 291). The attitude as always is to “wait and see,” to have faith in no one and nothing else but oneself.

Conclusion
This study has so far focused on a discourse of the figure of Sisyphus and its representation in Richard Wright’s Native Son. This is attained through an adoption of the Camusian rhetoric found in his The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Readings. We have adopted also the mythic vision of tragedy we find in Frye’s Anatomy of Criticism. The myth is explored as connoting recurrence of patterns in literary works. The choice of the archetypal literary theory is motivated by the view of Northrop Frye that archetype connotes “a symbol which connects one poem with another and thereby helps to unify and integrate our literary experience” (Frye, 1957, p. 99). Aspects of Sisyphus have thus been traced in all great literature, including the Christian Bible. This reading adopts ___ by its application of archetypal criticism ___ the possibility for the multiplicity of meanings in literary interpretations, as well as the shared significance that exists between works in the literary field, addressing the ancient question of tradition. The article is limited to racism as a Sisyphean tragic formative. It does not account for such other orientations of the text as protest, even though we see that the attitude of Sisyphus and Bigger underscore protest.

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