

# Example of essay on christ in concrete by di donato and black boy by wright

[Experience](#), [Belief](#)



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## **Introduction**

Richard Wright's, novel *Black Boy* and Di Donato's *Christ in Concrete* lend themselves to analysis on the theme of religion. *Black Boy* is the author's autobiographical account of his life from his earliest memories to his departure at age nineteen to the North. In the autobiography, Wright grows up in a highly racist environment in the South at the time of the Jim Crow laws and intense prejudice. He finds his way by being independent after his father abandons them. He comes off as the victim of his own thirst for physical and intellectual growth. He is forced to attend religious school because his actions, such as attempting to use a knife against Addie and swearing to Jody, force his aunt Addie and Grandmother to save his soul. However, this does not work out as planned. On the other hand, *Christ in Concrete* is Pietro DiDinato's powerful narrative of his struggles in the New York Italian culture. Paul, the protagonist, struggles to reconcile customs and traditional religious beliefs with the failure of Catholicism to make the lives of the immigrants better than they were. Paul feels rejected by the church when seeking help from the pastor but still maintains his strong faith. However, with the plight of his family becoming worse and after losing one of

his friends through murder, his faith receives a big blow, and he denounces Catholicism. Common to these two books is the story of religious faith and how the protagonists lose it. This essay examines Richard Wright's, novel *Black Boy* and Di Donato's *Christ in Concrete* and examines the path of the main characters to ethnoreligious rebellion.

First, in the two novels, the interaction with religion is central to the protagonists' formative years as children. In Richard Wright's, novel *Black Boy*, Richard's experience with fundamentalist Protestantism is so painful to the extent that he recoils from religion and traditional culture of any form and develops a perspective of life that is essentially secular. Wright's writings indicate that he was initially deeply influenced by religious practices and values of his early life. For example, he accepts the advice from his mother to attend church school. He even gets baptized because he does not want to be an embarrassment to his mother in front of the church congregation. His mother begs of him; "Come, son, let your old mother take you to God" (Wright 147) Wright receives severe religious training in his grandmother's household, which are based on Seventh-Day Adventism. Everyone whom Wright is exposed to at his grandmother's house, such as his grandmother and Addie, is deeply religious, while he is skeptical. Wright's response to the religious background he is exposed to is split fruitfully and powerfully. He at times adopted the Marxist view that religion is a dangerous fantasy for people who are oppressed because it dispersed their energies and acted as a distraction from the real problems they were facing. Richard's rebellion lands him in a religious school where his aunt Addie is the teacher. Richard's clashes with his family members continue to make him introverted

and far-removed from their practices and religion (Wright 143).

On the other hand, in *Christ in Concrete*, the protagonist, Paul is deeply engrossed in religion during his formative years. However, he embraces religion more readily than Richard and is less skeptical about. His initial encounters with the Christian religion are influenced heavily by Geremio, his father and Annunziata his mother. Geremio is deeply rooted in the faith although he faces great challenges. This is depicted by his prayer, " To rebel is to lose all of the very little. To be obedient is to choke. O dear Lord, guide my path (Donato 13). He believes in God to the moment of his death when he shouts " Show yourself now, Jesu! Now is the time! Save me! Why don't you come? Are you there! I cannot stand it-ohhh, why do you let it happen— where are you? Hurry hurry hurry!" (Donato 18). Although Paul initially believes in religion more than Richard does, he also has doubts about it. For example, he wonders why Jesus does not come to the aid of his father as wet cement is killing him. This is evidenced by his prayer when he says, " can you not send him back, O Lord?" (Donato 55). He also wonders why God does not help his family as they face great hunger and suffering.

Secondly, the two protagonists are influenced in different ways towards religion during their early years. Richard gets his influences on religion from his mother, grandmother and his Aunt Addie. For example, his mother beats him for failure to adhere to their religious persuasions. For Richard's family, religion is a safe haven, and it brings a sense of belonging and community with mutual support base. When Richard Wright is a young boy, his grandmother makes it her mission to turn him into a religious boy. She always tells him " to pray hard, to pray until tears came" (Wright 119). His

grandmother was very frustrated with Richard because he was rebellious and had " willful religious doubts, and feeble attempts at Christian devotion (Wright 119). Wright complied with these wishes from his grandmother with apprehension. Sometimes he felt that his prayers did not leave the room and that they were "" bound noiselessly against the ceiling" (Wright 120). His mother also attempts to make him join the church by indicating that she wanted him " to become a member of a responsible community church' (Wright 145). Aunt Addie becomes Richard's teacher after he is enrolled in religious school. The family members who Richard interacts with are all religious while he is skeptical.

Similarly, Paul, in *Christ in Concrete*, is heavily influenced towards Christianity by his immediate family members. His father, Geremio and Annunziata, his mother are religiously faithful. Geremio constantly asks God for guidance. He feels conflicted for being controlled by his job, leading to a struggle in his spirit. Paul embraces the influences around him with more readiness than Richard does.

Thirdly, the two protagonists in the two novels do not agree with their ethnic communities in some aspects. In *Black Boy*, Richard disagrees with the black community he is part of. He criticizes his black community for not uniting culturally and in traditions. This belief seemingly stems from his personal experiences of feeling alienated from his community and his own family. Although he believes that the white community and Southern tradition are oppressive, he blamed the black community for letting themselves be subordinated. He highlights the bleakness of black life in America and the confusion among black people. This confusion is especially accentuated by

the constant moving from the orphanage to his grandmother's house to Aunt Maggie's and to West Helene.

On the other hand, in *Christ in Concrete*, Paul is scornful of his community and his church for failure to work together to reduce the poverty that prevailed among the Italian immigrant community. Paul despises the Catholic Church for the failure to attract the immigrants. The American Catholic church's failure "to reach out to the Italian immigrants gave rise to the general impression that this Church was even more indifferent to their needs than the Church in Italy had been" (Mangione and Morreale 327). Paul also experiences the lack of concern by the church when one day, he decides to turn to his local priest for help and food. He struggles with the authorities to let him in and after he succeeds, he faces Father John. After he tells the Father that his family is hungry, he can only respond, "But tell me, what can I do?" (Donato 58). Paul sees this as an act of being forsaken by the church and extension, by God Himself. This scene illustrates Paul's challenges to maintain his faith despite the total failure by the church.

In both novels, the protagonists experience turning points that indicate their departure from affiliation with their initial religion and ethnic communities. In *Christ in Concrete*, Paul's journey in the faith is a tumultuous one. He escapes from religion by turning towards masonry work. After his incident with Father John, he feels unwanted by the Church and extension, God. This is indicated when he decides to turn to Job. Job was an apartment, six stories high, which was under construction and a source of employment for Paul. Job answers his prayers initially because he is able to cater to his family. His relationship with Job is fruitful initially. He finishes his first brickwork and is

immensely proud. However, he begins to think about God and to believe that God has made him discover Job: " The Lord has listened to him" (Donato 71). His next turning point comes when one of his friends who have immigrated from Russia is murdered for opposing the Czar. After being influenced by Louis, the idea that there is no God is implanted in him: ' Louis-haven't you-don't you believe in God?' The gray eyes turned full on him. ' There is no God.'" (Donato 140). After this revelation from Loius, Paul turns again to Job. He recommences the work that Job provides and supports his family. The presence of God in Paul's life slowly fades as the more real and reassuring job takes hold of him. The remnants of the Christian faith that are in Paul take a blow after a foreman trips and falls over a mortar and dies. He has completely lost his faith.

In *Black Boy*, Richard escapes from religion and the culture of his community through his writing. He is praised often for his ability to write well. He writes intensely psychological novel. He uses dialogue largely in his texts such as when he analyzes a line-by-line conversation between him and the gang. His literary works are important because they help one to understand how he grows up and why he despises religion and the beliefs of his black community. Through his work, Richard exposes the insecurities, hatred and confusion that run deep in the members of his black community. His writing serves as a point of divergence from the religion he had been forced to practice as a child and from the beliefs of his people. For example *The Voodoo of Hell's Half-Acre*, his best literary work, is scorned by members of his family and they label it a big lie. He departs from his community and begins to feel alienated from them: ' I began to be aware of myself as a

distinct personality striving against others (Wright 36). His writing shows his hatred of his community for letting themselves be made subordinate and subservient to white dominance. His isolation from the white people, as well as his own black community, takes a toll on his life, and he begins to feel unwanted. He is hostile to Aunt Maggie and Uncle Clark for their restraint on his free spirit. After encountering a lot of challenges in the south as a result of his rebellious nature, Richard decides to go to the Memphis in the North where he will not be judged for his views. By this time, he places more faith in his writing than his religion. He seeks to quench his thirst for intellectual growth and spends most of his time reading. Unlike Paul, who chooses his job over religion, Richard chooses intellectual knowledge.

## **Conclusion**

The novels: Richard Wright's, *Black Boy* and Di Donato's *Christ in Concrete* show similar paths taken by the protagonists in relation to their religious faith. Richard Wright gives an account of how his mother, aunt and grandmother strongly influence him to embrace religion. Despite these efforts, however, he does not readily accept to do so. He is skeptical towards the religion they practice. In *Christ in Concrete*, however, Paul, the main character is more receptive to religion. He is influenced by his father Geremio and his mother Annunziata, who have strong religious beliefs. However, even in his practice of religion, his criticisms are similar to those of Richard. He criticizes the church for not trying to work with the Italian immigrant community. Richard escapes into his thirst for intellectual knowledge and deserts religion, while Paul immerses himself into his work.



Although he struggles with the demands of his job and those of his religion, just as his father had done, he eventually deserts religion. His path and that of Richard are similar because they both devote their lives to earthly occupations instead of following the teachings of God as their parents had influenced them. However, Paul makes more effort than Richard to understand religion deep into his adulthood. Richard deserts religion at an earlier age.

## **Work Cited**

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