from Writing 135-01;

Living in the Age of the Antihero

a Portfolio of

thoughts,

analysis,

notes,

art,

etc.

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Table of Contents:

"The way to create art is to burn and destroy ordinary concepts and to
substitute them with new truths that run down from the top of the head and out
of the heart."
— Charles Bukowski

Introduction:

Dear Reader,

This collection of blog posts and essays documents my changing understanding of antiheroes as this semester progressed. When classes started this past September, my view of antiheroes was limited to reflections on my favorite Marvel characters and Disney's infamous Captain Jack Sparrow. Reading through the syllabus, I thought that my favorite texts and media from the class would be Frank Miller's *Batman* and Joss Whedon's *Buffy* both because they were familiar and because they seemed to have obvious antiheroic characters. As I reread my work from the semester while putting this portfolio together, though, I realized that the texts I found most compelling, the books that are now filled with black pen notes and dog-eared pages, were those that necessitated more discussion because their antiheroic protagonists were harder to identify.

At the beginning of the semester, I wrote what I knew. I could speak confidently about art, so, when we were assigned to analyze an element of either John Milton's *Paradise Lost* or Neal Gaiman's *A Hope in* Hell, I looked primarily at the graphic elements of Gaiman's work. By the end of the semester, though, after we had struggled to decide whether Mersault, Sethe, and Kathy, the protagonists of *The Outsider*, *Beloved*, and *Never Let Me Go*, should be classified as antiheroes and why, I also began explore more open-ended topics. Most especially, though, I began to write about where antiheroes can be found in my own life. If the lines between hero and villain were so severely blurred in fiction that more characters resembled antiheroes than either of the extremes, I thought, how could they not in life? This is the question I sought to answer with my most recent assignments.

I chose to organize my portfolio chronologically, beginning with my first blog post and ending with my Zine, Triquetra, so that my writings would reflect both my changing understanding of antiheroes and my progression from more general writing to writing oriented around my theme of antiheroes in life. The texts that I used for my blogs were, chronologically, Neal Gaiman's *A Hope in Hell*, Frank Miller's *Batman: The Return of the Dark Knight*, Albert Camus's *The Outsider*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, and Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*. For my essay writing assignments, I focused on Neal Gaiman's *The Sandman: Preludes and Nocturnes* and "Book 1" of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Albert Camus's *The Outsider*, and Toby Whithouse's *Being Human* BBC series. When I created my Zine at the end of the semester, I adapted and extended my thoughts about *The Outsider*, borrowing elements from my work in Assignment 3 with *Being Human*.

As you peruse my work and come to see antiheroes in fiction and in life from my perspective, developing an understanding as you move through my thoughts about the various texts and media, I challenge you to answer the same questions I did through my work this semester:

What is an antihero? Who are antiheroes in life? And where are you in your answer?

Sincerely,

Eliza D McNair

Without further ado···

Blog 1: A Hope in Hell – Setting the Scene

Neil Gaiman's idea of Hell is not at all typical. The color palette isn't limited to dark, darker, and darkest, and the landscape does not appear dangerous. No, Gaiman's Hell is more depressed than angry. The colors are pastels – grays, purples, browns, and dusky pinks – filling a landscape that resembles an open wound. The mountain on the Plains of Hell that Morpheus, Lucifer, Azazel, and Beezlebub stand upon while looking for Morpheus's helmet looks like an artery, an exposed organ, while the Woods of Suicide bleed despair. Hell itself is not monstrous, in Gaiman's eyes, but many of its residents are.

The desolate landscapes of Hell are filled with grotesque creatures that wouldn't be out of place catching water on the sides of gothic cathedrals. They are gruesome caricatures of men and animals, fleshed out with detail and shading. As Scott McCloud might say, instead of "[allowing] readers to mask themselves in a character and safely enter a sensually stimulating world", the simple geography of Hell in "The Sandman" allow readers to step into Gaiman's world without being caught in identification with its more horrific occupants.

Now the scene has been set. We're in Hell, alongside monsters and souls trapped in the Deep. Enter the major players: Morpheus, drawn in dark colors and plagued by loneliness, the (anti)Hero vs. Lucifer, the fallen Morningstar whose angelic appearance sets him apart from his compatriots; Beezlebub and Azazel, both monstrous, and their demon armies.

While watching Morpheus and Choronzon duel in The Hellfire Club, we see that this is the fundamental struggle between dark and light, between "Anti-Life….The Dark at the End of Everything" (125) and "Hope" (125). But Morpheus, whose deathly pale skin, shadowed eyes, and black hair appear almost sinister, is on the side of Hope. He's the Anti-hero, standing against Lucifer and refusing to submit to Hell's power. He's flawed, lonely, dark, and in a realm beyond his own Dreamworld, but confident that his own power remains because Hell itself would have no power "if those here imprisoned were not able to dream of Heaven" (128).

After all, it's all about contrast. Hell to Heaven. Dark to Light. Anti-life to Hope. In the words of Milton: "The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n" (254-255).

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Assignment 2:
The Personification and Characterization of Hell in Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman: Preludes and Nocturnes*

Hell is a paradox. It is simultaneously dark, plunging into the deepest, blackest corridors of human heads and hearts, and it is ablaze. It is an inferno, burning and torturing sinners to purge them of their flaws, and it is empty, endless, and horrible. It exists as a place, a destination of dark geography, and it lives in the mind of every person. The only constant in the enigma Hell presents can be summarized with a warning in Dante's *The Divine Comedy*: "Ye who enter, abandon all hope". In their Epic narratives, *Paradise Lost* and "A Hope on Hell", the fourth chapter of *The Sandman: Preludes and Nocturnes*, John Milton and Neil Gaiman approach the

abstract concepts of Hell, Satan, and Lucifer with different strategies but the same objective. In the worlds of Milton and Gaiman, Hell transcends location and is personified as a character.

When Lucifer fell, he became both Satan and Hell as he crafted the dark infinity of the Pit into a kingdom of his own design and being. "Book 1" of Milton's *Paradise Lost* describes Hell as "A Dungeon horrible, on all sides round / As one great Furnace flam'd, yet from those flames / No light, but rather darkness visible... " (ll. 61-64), that has been "swallow'd up in endless misery" (l. 142). The misery Milton refers to is the misery of Satan. Hell is Satan's place, and is, therefore, an extension of Satan's self. The deep recesses of Satan's heart that contain his anger, despair, and disillusionment are projected onto Hell's landscape as the hills, the fiery lakes, and the darkness itself. The perverted kingdom and dark sovereign Milton introduces in "Book 1" of *Paradise Lost* are one and the same. Hell is Satan, and Satan is Hell.

The landscape of Milton's Hell in *Paradise Lost* and the physical form that Satan adopts are both manifestations of the fallen archangel. The dichotomous existence of Satan can be equated most easily with the primeval Greek gods and goddesses, Uranus and Gaia. Uranus personifies the Sky and Gaia the Earth, but the two deities also appear in the mythologies as human-like beings. More specifically, Gaia is both the Earth itself and the corporeal mother of the other Titans. This manner of thinking applies to Milton's Satan, who is described as being "long and large / ... floating many a rood, in bulk as huge / As whom the Fables name of monstrous size…" (ll. 194-197), but who also interacts with his dark army as a single commanding figure. Later in "Book 1", Milton equates a volcanic hill in Hell with "[Satan's] womb" to further stress the geographic personification (l. 674).

Though Gaiman and Milton both personify Hell, Milton characterizes Hell and Satan as the same entity while Gaiman casts Hell and Lucifer as two separate characters. In Gaiman's

massive and pantheistic universe, Hell existed before Lucifer fell and will continue to exist when he ends his own perdition. It is drawn in pastel colors, a sharp contrast to the typically imagined red and black tones, and the geography is both organic and dynamic. When Dream first returns to Hell in "A Hope in Hell" to see Lucifer and recover his helmet, he follows Etrigan through the Woods of Suicide and notes that the landscape has changed. Even the Woods, whose withered, dark brown branches look dark and dead against the lavender sky, have changed since Dream's last visit (see fig. 1). Buildings will crumble, statues will be overturned, and regimes will fall, but the Wood will still grow as Hell adapts and continues.

Like the Woods, the Gates to Hell and Lucifer's Palace are both grotesque representations of Hell's organic nature and indicators of Gaiman's personification of Hell's landscape. Dream's first view of Hell at the inception of his quest in "A Hope in Hell", is the Gates; they twist upwards in rounded, biological shapes, many of which are recognizably human body parts, and are colored in dark reds, olive greens, and varying shades of pale purplish grays (see fig. 2). While visually disturbing, the composition of the Gates to Hell is important because it is indicative of the landscape and architecture to follow. An example of this architecture is Lucifer's Palace, an organic structure that towers over the rest of the landscapes. It is composed of the same humanoid shapes that make up the Gates, but on Lucifer's Palace the figures are distorted and demonic. The colors are vibrant and warm; pinks, purples, and reds are contrasted by the cooler greens and olive blacks of the celestial backdrop (see fig. 3). Collectively, the colors and architecture simultaneously emphasize the organic quality and unique atmosphere of Hell.

Like Milton, Gaiman makes use of geographic personification to create a biologically suggestive landscape in Hell. Both writers equate the hills in Hell to different body parts: Milton

to a womb, and Gaiman to an open wound with the hill Dream, Lucifer, and Etrigan stand on in "A Hope in Hell" as they look out over a sea of demons is disturbingly similar to an artery that has been exposed and sliced neatly into a stump on which the characters can perch. The stump is wider at the base, curving through concave lines into the ranks of Hell's monstrous occupants. As it tapers upward, the wrinkles and organic creases become more prevalent and the initial pink, fleshy tones bleed into bright, scarlet tones. The shading and contrast also become more evident as the hill moves skyward; the hatched, parallel and perpendicular lines that give the stumped artery dimension at its base transition quickly to dense, black shadows that force the eye to pull the image forward from the sparse, gray background (see fig. 4). With his graphic narrative, Gaiman is able to further characterize Hell with chillingly organic illustrations and repulsive associations of Hell's surface to flesh.

Milton and Gaiman's endeavors to represent Hell as its own character in their Epic narratives is essential because of the abstract nature of Hell. It is impossible to determine whether Hell is a physical place, as Gaiman suggests in *The Sandman*, or an intangible depth in the human psyche, as Milton suggests in *Paradise Lost* when Satan declares: "The mind is its own place, and in itself / Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n" (ll. 254-255). In either case, Hell is a living world for dead souls. It is adapting, changing, and entirely autonomous. As Dante wrote in *The Divine Comedy*: "Eternal, and eternal I shall endure. / All hope abandon, ye who enter here."
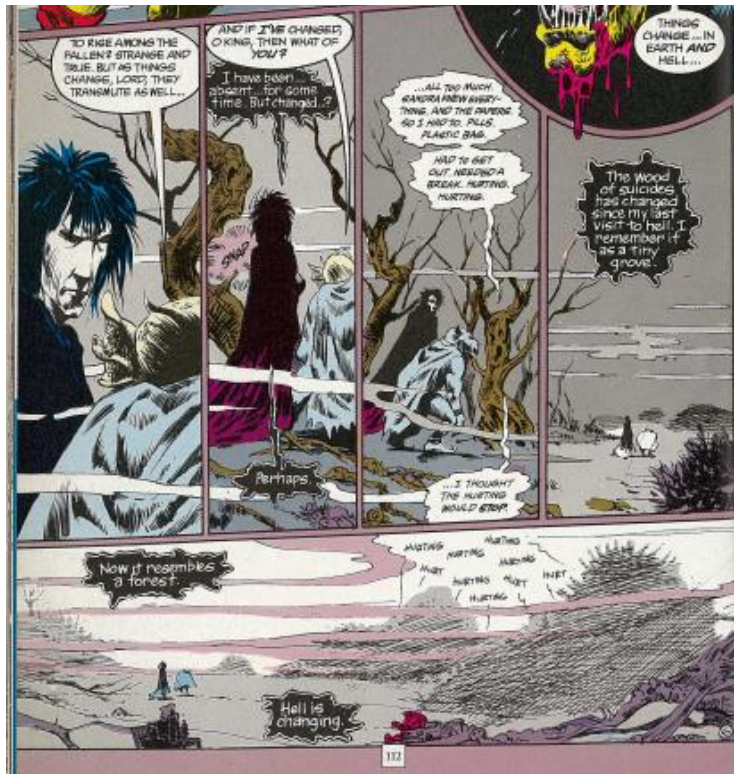
Appendix

Figure 1: The Woods of Suicide

Figure . 2: The Gates of Hell

Figure 3: Lucifer's Palace

Figure 4: Open Artery, A Hill in Hell

Blog 2: Batman – Black, White, and Shades of Gray

If it was an age of heroes, a "Golden Age", as the Daily Planet reports "Snapper" said in the "Truth to Power" article preceding "Book 1" in The Dark Knight Returns, then it must also have been an age of villains.

It's a simple assertion to make. Heroes are pointless without some evil, some villains, to fight. And vice versa, if there were no heroes to stop the villains and to defend 'good', then there wouldn't be a story to read. Just and endlessly growing tower of crime reports. But, in this graphic novel, it isn't that cut and dry. There's more to the Batman story than black and white. More than good and bad. More than heroes and villains.

The comic book superhero story typically has a protagonist - the hero - and his or her antagonist - the weekly villain. The story is polarized in its panels and in our minds. We read about the crusader who throws himself into the line of fire to save a city [good], or the saviour who makes a daring rescue without a thought for her personal safety [good]. The Dark Knight Returns challenges this black and white type of universe in every way, beginning with it's hero. The Batman is a dark figure. He's a vigilante, wealthy and reckless enough to wage a one-man war against the criminal network of Gotham city that he blames for the loss of his parents. He's an enigma for Gotham's citizens because he is fighting crime and taking down criminals that might have overwhelmed the police force, but he's operating with revenge in the forefront of his mind instead of heroics. He's called dangerous, and he is. A danger to his enemies, definitely, but also a danger to any of Gotham's citizens or police who get in his way.

And a danger to Bruce Wayne. Readers of The Dark Knight Returns will notice a distinct separation of Bruce and The Batman. When speaking or thinking, Bruce refers to himself in the first person, but he Batman in the third person. The Batman, though a part of Bruce, isn't entirely under his control. Before his "rebirth" as Batman, we see Bruce in his home, struggling to stay in control of his memories and of his dark alter-ego. Just as Harvey Dent's face was split in two by the acid to reveal the madness within, so is Bruce Wayne split. Unlike Harvey, though, he's torn into two separate personas and his insanity is easier to cover up.

In my opinion, the reason Bruce Wayne funded the rehabilitation and surgery that tried to make 'Two Face' into Harvey Dent again was to prove to himself that recovery is possible. If Harvey could be free of 'Two Face', then couldn't Bruce one day be free of the Batman?

There is no salvation for Bruce, though. He's not the hero in one of those black and white stories. He's the Batman, an anti-hero, and he's made up of every shade of gray in the spectrum.

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Blog 3: Tender Indifference

Reading *The Outsider*, I was continuously disturbed by the narration of Meursault, the protagonist. In "Part 1" of the novel, Meursault's apathy – his disconnect and disinterest in his mother's funeral, in his relationship with Marie, and in the abuse of women and animals

occurring in his building – left me with an intense dislike of the man. When Meursault shot the Arab man on the beach at the end of "Part 1", I confess I wasn't shocked. I'd been at the edge of my seat for the entire first half of the book. 'Something has to happen', I kept telling myself, 'this, factual retelling of a week's events, can't be all there is to the book'. When I did finish "Part 1", though, all I could think was 'Why?'.

'Why kill the man? Did Meursault know he was going to kill the man? Why shoot four more times after killing him?' Of all of these questions, the third is to me the most chilling. The overkill, the absolute separation between Meursault and his victim despite their common humanity, and Meursault's awareness that he has "rapped sharply, four times, on the fatal door of destiny" (Camus 54) confuse and appall me. I spent most of my time while reading "Part 2" looking for my answer – 'Why? Why shoot four more times?

From the trial, it seemed like even Meursault may not have fully understood his decision. Different criticisms suggest a wide range of motivations – a metaphoric, politically driven murder; a juvenile demand for attention; a symbolic killing to command the attention of the father figure, the sun; or even a satiric parody of the life and death of Jesus – but at the end of the novel, in Meursault's final few lines, I found my answer.

Meursault says that he "opened himself up to the tender indifference of the world" and "[felt] it so like [him], so like a brother" (Camus 111). To me, this line explains why Meursault can describe the sun, the sea, and nature as a whole with the passion of a romantic when his descriptions of his relationship with Marie, his girlfriend, are so flat and factual. Meursault

identifies with the Earth. He observes. He watches people, and he describes what he sees with the same energy another might person might describe their weekly grocery list. He feels more connected to the Earth, because of the kinship between them that he perceives, than he does to humanity.

So why did Meursault kill the Arab? Why did he fire four more times? You'd get a different answer from any student or published critic you ask, I think, but I propose it was because he didn't feel that he was connected to the man. He may have felt remorse or regret or something when he killed the man, but not enough to overcome his apathy.

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Assignment 2:

From Brombert, Scherr, and Camus –

Analyzing *The Outsider* using its Triangular Character Structure

As readers, how can we identify with a protagonist whose apathy is so intense that even our dislike for him distances us from him? How can we hope for this protagonist's triumph or resurrection when he openly denounces God and any overarching meaning in life? These are the conundrums Albert Camus presents readers of *The Outsider* via his protagonist, Meursault.

Meursault is not a traditional hero, and *The Outsider* cannot be read and analyzed as an epic novel solely about two opposing forces of good and evil. In order to analyze the novel, identifying Meursault as a third, atypical element corrupting the traditional black and white storyline is essential.

To understand Meursault, I turned to Victor Brombert, a French literary critic, for his expertise on antiheroes in his book *In Praise of Antiheroes*; to Arthur Scherr, a literary critic, for his opinions in two essays about Meursault's character: "Camus's The Stranger" and "Meursault's Dinner with Raymond: A Christian Theme in Albert Camus's *L'Estranger*; and to Camus's own thoughts about Meursault. Together, Brombert's thoughts about the characteristics of antiheroes, Scherr's insights about parallels between Meursault and Jesus, and Camus's reflections on the religious significance of Meursault lead me to propose a system of analyzing *The Outsider*: a triangular model filled by the three most notable characters, Meursault, Raymond, and Emmanuel.

Victor Brombert wrote in his book*, In Praise of Antiheroes*, that "the antihero is often a perturber and disturber" whose existence and departure from traditional heroic ideals represent a modern interpretation of the struggle "to cope with the meaning or lack of meaning of life" (2). In his essay, Brombert attempts to convey to his readers that antiheroes fill the role heroes once held in society: the characterized and empowered reflection "of how we see, or wish to see ourselves" (2). The overarching theme of Brombert's essay is to introduce and explain the transition from traditional heroism to antiheroism. He defines an antihero as a figure who redefines the heroic ideal by finding strength in his weaknesses and by stressing the courage he gains from overcoming his adversities. These antiheroes are more human than superhuman; they

exemplify ideals such as resilience, perseverance, and fortitude. Instead of presenting readers with unattainable ideals, they offer us more accessible and relatable role models (5, 9).

I am inclined to agree with Brombert's understanding of antiheroes. His view aligns with my belief that today's society values antiheroes more than classical heroes, such as Beowulf or Odysseus, because we can more easily identify with the struggles and flaws of antiheroes. In my opinion, to read a novel and to hope for the recovery or triumph of an antihero in his struggle to give meaning to his life is to hope for the same possibility in our own lives.

Albert Camus's description of Meursault in his novel, *The Outsider*, both supports this interpretation of antiheroes as reflections or representations of individuals in modern society and comments on the existential enigma of man's role in a supposedly godless world. Camus famously described Meursault as "the only Christ we deserve", a perspective which I agree with, though I protest its implications for society. As an antiheroic Christ or "Antichrist" (Camus 64), as he is called by the judge in "Part 2" of *The Outsider*, Meursault is the epitome of apathy. He is a killer without remorse; a man with seemingly no emotion; and a lover who describes the sun and sea more passionately than his own girlfriend, Marie. But could Meursault still be described as an Antichrist if he killed the Arab for some reason other than extreme apathy and disconnect from humanity? Thus, before proceeding with the assumption that Meursault is, in fact, an antihero and Antichrist, other possible motivations for his crime must be eliminated.

Arthur Scherr refutes the common opinion that Meursault is a juvenile fool, seeking out violence for no other reason than petty discontent with the world or for the attention it would bring him in his essay entitled "Camus's *The Stranger*". Scherr systematically moves through published criticisms of *The Outsider,* discussing the arguments presented about Meursault's character before concluding with his own belief in Meursault's intelligence (153). Scherr argues

that Meursault is both intelligent and apathetic to the extent that he allows the opinions and thoughts of others to become his own. In his essay, Scherr references the scene in "Chapter 5" of "Part 1" in which Meursault's boss offers him the opportunity to work at a new office in Paris (151). Meursault's response to this offer is in equal parts analytical and indifferent. He is a good employee, but he is entirely uninterested in his future with the company beyond his continued employment. Meursault is a blank slate, and it is because of this, I believe, that Camus is able to reflect not only the ideas of Meursault's friends onto his opinions but also Camus' own ideas about existentialism and preference for antiheroic protagonists (150). In fact, Scherr himself utilizes Meursault's apathy to impress religious undertones into the text and to further define Meursault by comparing him to Jesus.

In another of his essays, "A Christian Theme in Albert Camus's L'Estranger", Scherr elaborates on the various similarities between Meursault and Jesus. Scherr pulls from all chapters of *The Outsider* to draw satiric comparisons between Meursault and Jesus, including the 'Last Supper' Meursault and Raymond shared that began the chain of events leading up to the murder, the fact that the murder occurred on a Sunday, and Meursault's choice of words – "so that it might be finished" (111) – at the end of the novel which echo those of Jesus. Scherr goes on to suggest that Meursault's extreme apathy, for which he is condemned by the jury, is similar to Jesus's moral teaching to not judge others (194, 195, 198). These similarities outlined by Scherr contribute to the understanding of Meursault as an Antichrist because of their focus on the events that either lead up to the murder of the Arab or were a direct result. Rather than dying for a cause, Meursault killed for no reason and was condemned to die for not showing emotion at his mother's funeral. From here, with Meursault confirmed as an Antichrist and antihero, I propose

that the two extremes framing an Antichrist or an antihero – Christ and hero, and Satan and villain – can also be identified as characters in *The Outsider*.

The three characters, Meursault, Raymond, and Emmanuel can be represented with a triangle that can also be filled by an Antichrist, Satan, and Christ, or by an antihero, a hero, and a villain (see Fig. 1). Meursault is the Antichrist. His actions in *The Outsider* are a parody of the life of Jesus, particularly leading up to their respective death sentences (195). Raymond is Meursault's Satan. When Raymond invites Meursault to dinner, he mimics the Serpent in the Garden of Eden and tempts Meursault by asking him to write the letter to his Arab mistress (193). Scherr describes this moment when Meursault agrees to write the letter as the point where he loses his innocence (192). Following this decision, Meursault is on his path to the beach where he kills the Arab and to the guillotine.

Emmanuel, who occupies the third point of the triangle in the place of Christ or God himself, is the absent god in Camus's novel. Unlike all of Meursault's other friends and acquaintances who appeared at the trial to testify, Emmanuel is only mentioned in *The Outsider* twice. He is a co-worker and friend of Meursault's. The two go to Celeste's for lunch one day during work, and Meursault also mentions in passing that he and Emmanuel attended the movies together twice in the week preceding the murder (23-24, 31). In his essay, Scherr references that in the Book of Isaiah, the son Mary carries is called Immanuel. He goes on to suggest that Camus's Emmanuel maybe be a parody of God or Jesus, that is, an absent god to reflect Camus's own existential religious opinions (196-197). By rarely featuring Emmanuel in *The Outsider*, Camus metaphorically abandons his Antichrist, Meursault, to the guillotine without hope for any resurrection.

If Meursault is indeed "the only Christ we deserve", it is not the fault of the human race, but a natural byproduct of our societal development and universal conscience. We no longer live in an age of classical heroes, and we no longer look for a Christ with infallible morals. Instead, we identify with the figure at the top of the pyramid, with the flawed and unconventional antihero.

This triangular paradigm for literary analysis is a pyramid of passion, emotion, morality, or the lack of all aforementioned qualities. At the base sit Christ and Satan, or the Hero and Villain, at opposite ends. Both figures are passionate and emotive. They possess strict moral compasses, though their consciences are the equal and opposites of each other, and in all regards they are each other's balancing force. The Antichrist or Antihero sits at the top of the pyramid, hovering over the balanced bases in a state characterized by moral ambiguity, apathy, and self-obsession. The Antihero embodies both heroic and villainous qualities, just as the Antichrist is neither entirely holy nor entirely satanic. Though not all works of literature will conform to this triangular structure, when applicable, it can simplify convoluted plots into the same story with three, fundamental characters.

Appendix:

Figure 1

Antichrist

Christ   Satan

Meursault

Emmanuel   Raymond

Antihero

Hero   Villain
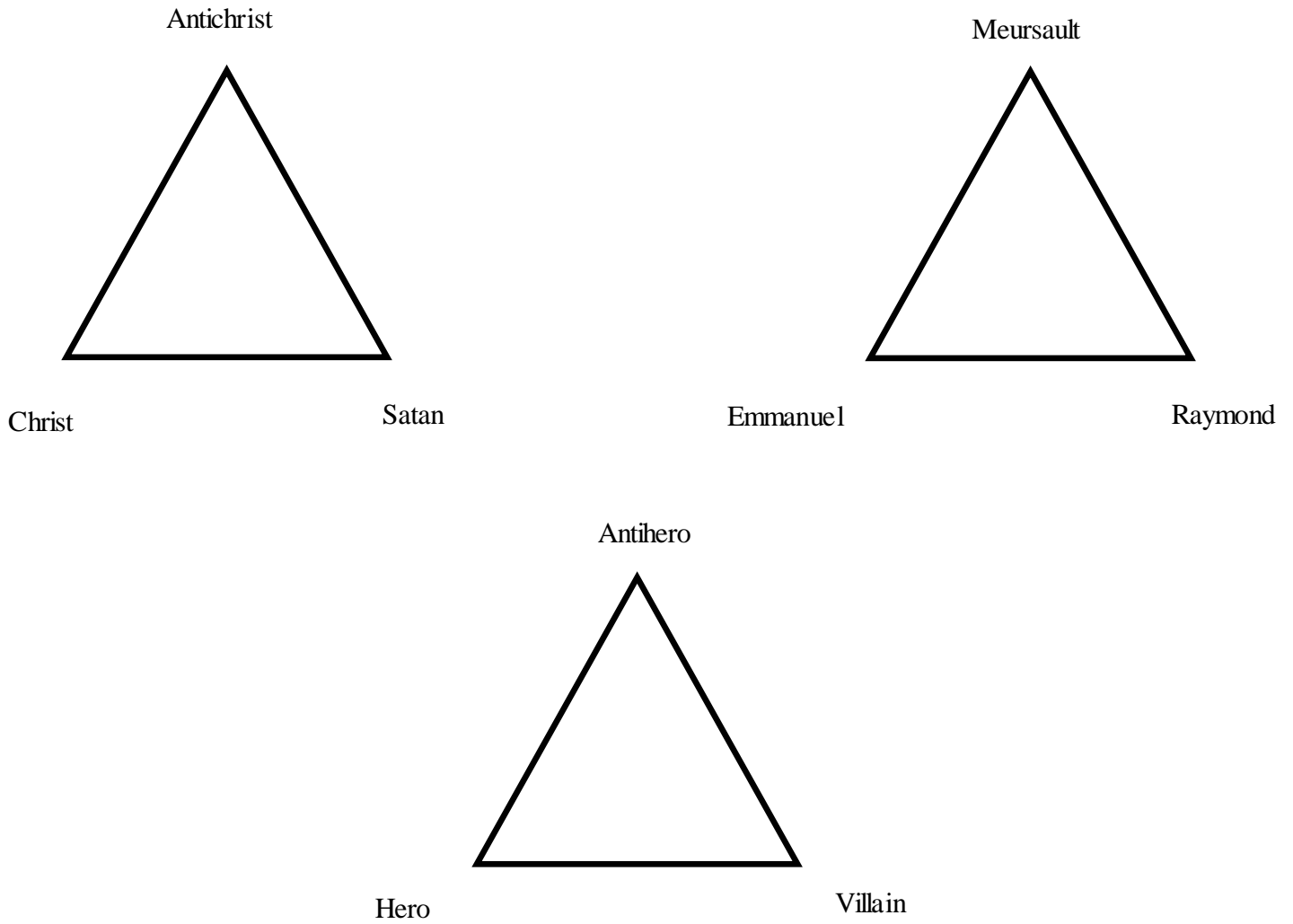
Blog 4: Time and Shadows, Forwards and Backwards

For me, the most intriguing element of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is the way the author deals with time in her novel. *Beloved* is neither written *in medias res* nor strictly from the beginning of Beloved and Sethe's stories to the end. Rather, the novel spans Sethe's life, traveling forwards and backwards through time with ease. This smooth blending of past and present is enhanced by both Sethe's storytelling, especially when Beloved comes into 124, and by Sethe and Paul D reminiscing about their lives at Sweet Home.

After telling Denver the story about Amy and Sethe's journey while pregnant, Sethe talks about "rememory". She says that things which are in her "rememory" cannot be destroyed. As an example, she says that "if a house burns down, it's gone, but the place - the picture of it - stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there in the world" (43). In this way, people, places, and things that have been lost are still accessible; they transcend time, existing in the "rememor[ies]" of individuals and as ghosts in the world. Despite this sensitivity to the permanence and existence of memories in life, however, Sethe still tries to avoid thinking about certain parts of her past. Instead, she lets faces and times slip away from her and cannot see that Beloved, the girl who comes to stay in her home, is more than just a girl.

Sethe begins to reconcile herself with her past and future on two occasions - first, when she, Paul D, and Denver are going to and returning from the carnival, and second, when she tells beloved about crystal earrings. While walking to the carnival, Sethe observes that "the shadows that shot out of their feet to the left held hands", and, "on the way home, though leading them now, the shadows of three people still held hands" (57, 59). In these two scenes, Sethe sees a transition

from her past to her future, from following (to the left) to leading, in Paul D and Denver. Here, she does not run from her past, she leads it forwards. Instead of the future "being a matter of keeping the past at bay", it is something she walks willingly towards, holding the hands of her friend (lover?) and daughter (51). Later, while answering Beloved's question about her earrings, Sethe again begins to see that her past need not only cause her pain. She is shocked to find herself "wanting to [talk], liking it" when Beloved asks (69).

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Blog 5: Speculation, Dystopia, and "The Dead Poet's Society"

There were a number of elements of *Never Let Me Go* that intrigued me. The mysterious "outside", the total lack of adults excluding the teachers and deliverymen, the details Kathy uses to describe Hailsham, and the easy fluctuation of past and future in Kathy's memories (32). I have neither read *Never Let Me Go* nor seen the movie adaptation, but Kazuo Ishiguro's use of words like "donor", "donation", and "carer", along with the lack of dialogue about "what's going to happen to [them] one day", suggest that Hailsham's students will not have typical lives (29).

The inevitability of the students' futures seems to be a life of (organ donation?), based on hints left in the novel by Ishiguro, and Hailsham an institution designed to raise the donors for their purpose. Still, the first four chapters of the book present a number of unanswered questions about

Hailsham and its occupants: Where the children's parents? How young are they when they come to Hailsham, or do they spend their entire lives in the school? What is the significance of the Gallery? What aren't the students being told about their futures? Combined, the information and lack-of-information about Hailsham paints a grim picture for both the students and for the state of the world that creates/perpetuates this system. I'm not yet sure whether Ishiguro's world can be called a dystopia, but, if Hailsham is indeed raising children to raise their organs, it certainly is corrupt.

Within this (possibly) dystopian society, though, Hailsham succeeds by one standard to which our modern society often falls short. While reading Kathy and Ruth's discussion about the obsession with poetry and the universal regard at Hailsham for talented poets, I was reminded of John Keating's (Robin Williams) insistence to his class in *The Dead Poet's Society* that "medicine, law, business, [and] engineering [are] noble pursuits and necessary to sustain life, but poetry, beauty, romance, [and] love … are what we stay alive for". Hailsham is, I believe, a place of immoral action and questionable life purpose, but it raises students who value poetry over possession, no matter the poetry's quality, in their Exchanges. Hailsham's students are born to die, they have perhaps a better grasp on what Mr. Keating says "makes life worth living" than we do.

We don't read and write poetry because it's cute. We read and write poetry because we are members of the human race. And the human race is filled with passion. And medicine, law, business, engineering, these are noble pursuits and necessary to sustain life. But poetry, beauty, romance, love, these are what we stay alive for.

–John Keating, *The Dead Poet's Society*

Assignment 3:

How Monsters can be more Human than Humans:

Analyzing the Humanity of Antiheroic, Supernatural Beings

with Nietzschean Morals and a Gothic Lens

So, a vampire, a ghost, and a werewolf share a flat in Bristol… what sounds like the beginning of a bad joke is actually an introduction to *Being Human*, a British television program created by Toby Whithouse that explores human psychology by way of three supernatural protagonists striving to achieve humanity. Whithouse's program, which focuses on the afterlives of Mitchell, an on-the-wagon vampire; George, a reluctant werewolf; and Annie, a ghost haunting the flat in which she died, is reminiscent of gothic literature, not only because of the supernatural elements of the show but also for the suggestion that man, or monster, cannot only be good or evil. This idea of psychological complexity refutes the good versus evil dichotomy and instead recognizes a norm of immorality and of moral ambiguity. This shift from in paradigm for psychological analysis mirrors the shift from heroic to antiheroic culture described by the literary critic Victor Brombert in his book, *Unheroic Modes*. Antiheroes, Brombert says, are figures who defy the standards of classical heroism and demolish unachievable ideals perpetuated by traditional heroes. As supernatural antiheroes in *Being Human*, Mitchell, George, and Annie defy the apparent paradox of 'human' monsters and affirm that 'human' refers not to a species, but to an indestructible potential for salvation in a morally ambiguous existence.

John Mitchell, the vampire in *Being Human*, was tortured by an internal struggle between his addiction to blood and his determination to stop killing. Mitchell, who was born over a hundred years before *Being Human* is set, became a vampire while fighting in World War I when another vampire, Herrick, bit him instead of killing him. Condemned to live as a "parasite" of the

human race, Mitchell followed Herrick, killing and drinking until he could no longer cope with the weight of his murders (Whithouse 3.01). After leaving Herrick, Mitchell gave up killing and began working in a hospital so that he could steal blood from its stores. He found traces of the humanity he desired by living with George and Annie, but was always plagued by the inevitability he perceived of his next murder. At the end of "Season 3" of *Being Human*, after massacring a train car of civilians the season before, lying to his friends, and suffering for his mistakes, Mitchell begged George to help him end the eternal cycle of murder and penance he followed (Whithouse). When George finally agreed to assist in Mitchell's suicide, he stabbed Mitchell with a wooden stake and released Mitchell from his purgatory with the words: "I'm doing this because I love you" (Whithouse, 3.6).

George Sands, another of the three protagonists of *Being Human*, hated and feared the werewolf within him at the beginning of the show because he believed it distanced him from humans and prevented him from every living a normal life. While traveling in Scotland with his fiancé, George was attacked and bitten by a werewolf. Though George survived his injuries, he walked away with physical and psychological scarring that brought his old life to a close. When George learned about the consequences of his attack, he fled, abandoning his parents and his fiancé, and began his afterlife. Until he met Mitchell, George lived as a vagabond, avoiding any connections with people because he believed he was nothing more than a monster. At the end of "Season 1", however, George stopped trying to separate himself from the wolf and instead recognized that he was both. Though he continued to struggle with his paranormal life and with unintentionally turning Nina, his girlfriend, into a werewolf, George began to accept the duality of his nature by reintegrating himself with humanity and through his relationships with Mitchell, Annie, and Nina (Whithouse).

Though as a ghost, Annie Sawyer is the least threatening of *Being Human*'s protagonists, she is also distanced the most from humanity by her inability to be seen or to truly interact with the living. Before Mitchell and George moved into the London flat they later shared with Annie, the pair was not aware that the house was haunted, only that one of the previous tenants died in a fall down the stairs. When Annie, Mitchell, and George first met, all three were surprised, but none more so than Annie because, as a vampire and a werewolf, they were able to see, talk, and touch her. The addition of Mitchell and George into Annie's life provided her with the friendship and romance that her death ripped away from her. Despite her continued struggle with the circumstances of her murder and with her separation from the living, Annie was able to see most easily that she, Mitchell, and George have found salvation in the afterlife and some semblance of humanity through their relationships (Whithouse).

Mitchell, George, and Annie can be classified as gothic protagonists because of their supernatural existences and, especially in the case of Mitchell, because of the ambiguity of their statuses as heroes or as a villains. According to the author Robert Hume, gothic literature is often incorrectly simplified to supernatural creatures, haunted houses, and other such clichéd horror motifs (Hume 282). Though gothic literature can include these elements, they alone fail to encompass the entirety of the genre and to express the complexity of character pivotal to the success of gothic works. Chronologically, gothic writing followed romantic literature and, while romantic authors sought to maintain a separation between the reader and the character's emotions, the goal of gothic literature was to evoke emotion from readers (Hume 284). Common themes in gothic writing did include supernatural protagonists, like Frankenstein's monster or Mr. Hyde, but these characters were designed not to frighten readers but to maintain a fantastical and distant atmosphere that prevented readers from over-identifying with the protagonists (Hume

286). These characters were psychologically complex and morally ambiguous "hero-villain[s]" who demonstrated the impossibility of separating good and evil in man (Hume 287). As a modern analog from *Being Human*, Mitchell is a "hero-villain" because he cannot be condemned entirely for failing to control his blood addiction because of the turmoil bloodlust caused him and his struggles to control himself. He was never only evil or only good, and the belief that a man can split himself evenly between these two extremes was the fatal flaw of the protagonist in the classic gothic novel, the *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*.

Unlike the protagonists of *Being Human* who accept the moral ambiguity of their existences, Dr. Jekyll, the protagonist of Robert Louis Stevenson's novel, the *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, believed that he could isolate and remove the darkness within him. The novel spans the events beginning with Dr. Jekyll's attempt to separate the inhuman, brutish parts of his psyche into another identity – Mr. Hyde – and concludes when Jekyll's secrets are revealed after his death (Saposnik 717). When Jekyll took a potion he invented and released Hyde, his dark counterpart would roam London and commit violent crimes. Soon, though, Hyde began to overwhelm Jekyll, causing the scientist to transform without the potion. Jekyll and Hyde's story ends when Hyde supersedes Jekyll entirely and kills himself to avoid repercussions for his crimes. Jekyll was bound to fail because the doctor did not understand that his soul was more than two behavioral extremes and could not simply be divided into good and evil (Saposnik 721). When he created Hyde, Jekyll ignored "the inescapable conclusion that man must dwell in uncomfortable but necessary harmony with his multiple selves" and instead sought to take away the pressure to choose to be good (Saposnik 724). Mitchell, George, and Annie all carried on through their supernatural lives by choosing to be together and to try to be human, but Jekyll

believed that he could ignore the infinite complexities of his psyche and make himself only good without any inner conflict.

In order to make a fair judgment of the morality of all gothic protagonists, including the central characters in *Being Human*, a set of standards outlined by the philosophies of Friedrich Nietzsche can be used. In one of his books, Nietzsche introduces the phrase: "beyond good and evil". This quotation was later used in conjunction with Nietzsche's other writings by the philosopher Brian Leiter to create a system of judgment he calls "Nietzschean values" (Leiter 261, 263, 267). Nietzschean values operate on a principal understanding that there is no ideal norm, rather a norm of immorality and of natural limitation for people and for the world (Leiter 262; Hume 299). This value system differentiates between a good versus bad paradigm and a good versus evil paradigm, where good versus bad judges a person himself while good versus evil judges a person's actions (Leiter 263-4). The good versus evil paradigm is used in making character judgments by Nietzschean standards, and the application of this paradigm is of critical importance for supernatural characters like Mitchell, George, and Annie. The good versus bad system would immediately condemn these protagonists for their monstrous natures, but the good versus evil system emphasizes who they choose to be and how they choose to act. Another key element of being good by Nietzschean standards requires both self-affirmation and societal affirmation (Leiter 266). Because societal affirmation may never be given to gothic protagonists or Whithouse's characters, for Mitchell, George, and Annie, self-affirmation, belief in their own humanity and goodness, must be enough.

The norm of immorality outlined in the Nietzschean value system can also be described as an antiheroic norm, thus classifying Mitchell, George, and Annie as antiheroes. According to the critic Victor Brombert, antiheroes in today's society are "perturbers and disturbers" who

serve as vehicles for removing larger-than-life heroes from their pedestals and instead presenting readers with protagonists who can fail, recover, and soldier on. These characters are defined as much by their flaws and limitations as they are by their triumphs (Brombert 2, 3). Fyodor Dostoyevsky, a Russian philosopher and writer, associated the term 'antihero' with the word 'paradox' in his book, *Notes From the Underground*, in order to suggest that an antihero's morality is a paradoxical union of good and evil (Brombert 3). This paradox of good and evil describes the same moral ambiguity that gothic protagonists encompass and Nietzsche described with the phrase: "beyond good and evil" (Brombert 3; Hume 287; Leiter 261). As antiheroes, Mitchell, George, and Annie meet a societal need for protagonists who are flawed and fallible not only because of their supernatural status but also because of their faults, mistakes, and fears. Mitchell is a murderer, George turned his girlfriend into a werewolf, and Annie is invisible, but each strives to recover from their past and move forward.

Whithouse's decision to make his protagonists a vampire, a werewolf, and a ghost in *Being Human* is significant both because of the global ubiquity of monsters in folklore and because his characters threaten the distinction between human and monster. Instead of looking at monsters and humans as equal and opposite forces of evil and good, their relationship ought to be considered with the knowledge that "monsters [both] embody all that is dangerous and horrible in human imagination" and represent an extreme negative potential for humanity (Gilmore 1). Monsters exist in every culture because there is no discrimination, racial or otherwise, between the humans who possess a monstrous potential (Gilmore 1-4); Dr. Jekyll was an upstanding Victorian man, Mitchell was a soldier, George was an intelligent but otherwise average citizen, and Annie was a fashion student at university, yet all four became monsters (Stevenson; Whithouse). In many ways, monsters or other supernatural protagonists are

paramount antiheroes both because they are considered innately evil and because, in traditional epics, monsters were the villains persecuted and killed by heroes (Gilmore 5). For every Beowulf or St. George there was a Grendel or a Dragon, but, when these monsters are the protagonists of modern television programs, viewers forgive them their flaws and unashamedly hope they receive happy endings (Gilmore 5; Whithouse). This shift in the role of monsters calls into question who the villains really are: the traditional heroes who hunted and killed, or the vampire, werewolf, and ghost trying to defy their natures and be human?

The question above extends into a pivotal issue *Being Human* poses: Is it possible to be human (*adjective*) but not a human (*noun*)? [1] Aside from the linguistic difference between the two, where the adjective 'human' refers to a state of being whereas the noun 'human' refers to a species, there is an enormous difference in the moral implications of the two homonyms. Using a gothic lens and the values outlined with the Nietzschean standard, it is the actions of any person that make him good or evil. Thus, no Human 2 is necessarily good, and being Human 2 does not automatically indicate Humanity 1. The distinction between Human 2 and Human 1 is heavily dependent on choice: what people choose to do and choose to reveal. The repulsion that Humans 2[1] show for monsters in folklore and that the protagonists in *Being Human* experience represents the tendency of humans to isolate and persecute those who, due to "religious intolerance, racial hatred, [or] patriarchy … have become in a sense somehow *less than human*" (Germana 63-4). The choice to persecute and to destroy monsters, however, is in many ways more horrific than the actions of monsters who are driven by their natures.

In *Being Human*, the scientist, Lucy Jaggat, and Reverend Kamp exemplify the dark potential of humans when they try to isolate and eliminate a gene of evil expressed in

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[1] From here forward, human (*adjective*) will be denoted by Human 1 and human (*noun*) by Human 2.

werewolves. To do so, they trick werewolves like George and Nina into helping them by promising to cure their lycanthropy when, in reality, their cure killed all the werewolves involved in the trials (Germana 65-6 and Whithouse). This blatant disregard for life expressed by a doctor and by a man of God, who ought to be bound by the Hippocratic Oath and by Biblical Ethics, is highlighted by Mitchell when he confronts Lucy. Mitchell accuses her of ignoring that "God created all of us" and, while they are both "covered in other people's blood… there's one difference between [him] and [her]… [Lucy] had a choice" (Whithouse 2.8). The scene is particularly loaded because, in the previous episode, Mitchell lost control and massacred an entire box car of people when he learned Lucy was responsible for the deaths of all but two vampires in London (Whithouse). Mitchell's actions in the box car were as unpardonable as Lucy's in her laboratory, but Lucy's crimes were all committed out of a righteous desire to purge evil from the world while Mitchell's, excluding the boxcar, were motivated by the bloodlust intrinsic to vampires (Whithouse). What Lucy failed to understand was that, by trying to destroy monsters, she forfeited her humanity and revealed the evil within herself (Germana 70). Monsters are made from choices, not from some inherent evil, and every person contains the same destructive potential enhanced in supernatural beings.

If species does have nothing to do with humanity (*adj.*), then Mitchell, George, and Annie all achieved some degree of humanity because of the choices they made. Mitchell's tragedy was that redemption for his murders ultimately came not from his romance with Annie but from his assisted suicide. After hiding the truth about the "Box Tunnel Massacre" from his friends for a majority of the third season, Mitchell lost both their faith in him and failed by Nietzschean standards when he could no longer affirm his own goodness. Still, the strength that Mitchell showed in the face of his terror and desperation when he chose to stop himself from

killing anybody else, even at the cost of his own life, was his salvation. Mitchell was far from innocent, but he affirmed his humanity by recognizing the evil imbued within him and fighting to save others from it (Whithouse).

George asserted his humanity much earlier in the series when he finally accepted the duality of his existence. At the beginning of *Being Human*, George could not accept that the werewolf was a part of him. He referred to the wolf in the third person to distance himself from the beast as much as possible, and he locked himself away from anybody human in order to protect them and to protect himself (Germana 60; Whithouse). At the end of "Season 1" when the vampire, Herrick, asserted that the trio in *Being Human* will only infect the humans around them, however, George proclaimed mid transformation that his transformation "doesn't rob [him] of [his] humanity … It *proves* it" (Whithouse 1.06). With his acceptance of the werewolf, George succeeded by Nietzschean standards through self-affirmation and reconciliation of his dark potential with his propensity for good. By simultaneously claiming the wolf and his humanity, George forced himself to stop letting his lycanthropy cut him off from society and instead to start interacting with humans again.

Annie saved herself by choosing to believe in the validity of her relationships and friendships in the afterlife and to fight for her friends. As *Being Human* progressed, Annie began to understand that her afterlife was more potent and human than anything preceding it. The love Annie had with Owen, which was tainted and shattered upon her realization that he murdered her, paled in comparison to the love she and Mitchell shared in "Season 3". Living in London and Bristol with George, Nina, and Mitchell, Annie found "friendship and loyalty, sacrifice and courage … [and] witnessed the very best of being human" (Whithouse 3.01). When Annie chose to stop haunting her house and start defining herself by her connections with the dead rather than

with the living, she embraced the darkness of her new existence and began to find the light in her small refuge of humanity.

So what does it mean to be human? As a neo-gothic television series, *Being Human* succeeds both as an analysis of human psychology and a testament to the antiheroic nature of modern society. With three supernatural protagonists whose very existences deem them monstrous, the series illuminates the importance of choice and the unavoidable ambiguity of good and evil. For Mitchell, George, and Annie, a vampire, a werewolf, and a ghost, humanity arose from the choices they made in the name of love, of sacrifice, and of self-affirmation. Each neo-gothic antihero ultimately proved that human (*adj.*) is entirely independent of human (*n*) by accepting the darker elements tied to their existences and striving to be more than monsters. As Annie said, "humanity isn't a species, it's a state of mind. It can't be defeated, it moves mountains, it saves souls" (Whithouse 3.01).

Conclusion:

Of all the various themes, concepts, and controversial issues we explored in this class, the topic that I believe was most important topic stems from two of the first texts we studied, Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Gaiman's *The Sandman: Preludes and Nocturnes*, as well as the first poem in Lucille Clifton's eight poem series "brothers". All three texts deal with Lucifer and his infamous fall from grace, as well as, to varying degrees, the complex relationship between Lucifer and God.

In *Paradise Lost*, we know Lucifer only as Satan and are privy to his thoughts as he readies the demons and ex-deities who occupy Hell for his campaign to overturn God as the ruler of Heaven. In "Book 1", Satan notes that it is "better to reign in hell, than serve in heaven" (ll. 262-3), furthering the implication that God is tyrant and Satan the misunderstood revolutionary. In Gaiman's *The Sandman: Seasons of Mists*, however, we see a Lucifer as more resigned than angry. Instead of continuing his own imprisonment in Hell, he sets himself free from his own, self-enforced perdition by closing Hell and giving its key to Dream, the Sandman himself. Lastly, in Lucille Clifton's poem "brothers", we hear from Lucifer as he and God retire in Heaven and remember the age of men. The poem ends with Lucifer asserting that he and God are "like two old brothers/ who watched it happen and wondered/ what it meant" (ll. 14-16). Though each author portrayed Lucifer in a different place emotionally following his fall – chronologically: Milton, Gaiman, and then Clifton – I believe that, together, the three narratives ask the same question: was Lucifer forgiven?

When we first read and discussed *Paradise Lost* in class this semester, we spoke about theodicy, about heroic evil, about tyrannical heaven, and about whether or not Lucifer was always destined to fall. After spending the rest of the semester paging through novels; analyzing

television programs; annotating literary criticism; and, most of the time, paraphrasing Brombert's *Unheroic Modes* in my essays, I believe that, whether driven by free will or destiny, Lucifer's fall is unsurprising. I've stated in my Zine and in my essay about *Being Human* that I believe to be human is to be an antihero, and that to be an antihero is to fail and succeed is flux. Using my definition for antiheroism, then, Lucifer was certainly an antihero. He fell and succumbed to darkness, as shown my Milton; forgave himself and abandoned Hell, as depicted by Gaiman; and reunited with God in Heaven, as described by Clifton. Therefore, his fall was natural, but so was his eventual redemption. While I understand these are my interpretations of the texts and cannot be treated as fact, I think that from these interpretations comes both a consolation and a warning.

Lucifer's role in the original sin, his subsequent fall, and his transition beyond these mistakes as described by Gaiman and Clifton demonstrate the immutable reality of failure and revival in a human life. This is the consolation. To convey the warning, I borrow the words of Mark Twain:

"But who prays for Satan? Who in eighteen centuries has had the common humanity to pray for the one sinner who needed it most?"

As a species, as humans, I think we must take from these three stories of Lucifer the importance forgiving others their sins, and the importance of forgiving ourselves our sins. As humans, as antiheroes, I think giving and receiving acceptance, forgiveness, and affirmation is essential for achieving a compassionate and coexistent society.

After studying antiheroes for a semester and reflecting on their societal significance, I think I would be most interested in continuing to investigate topics introduced in class

discussions surrounding *Fun Home*, as well as in the essay by Monica Germana I read while researching for Assignment 3. Above I discussed antiheroism as a natural state of being, but Germana states explicitly that there have always been groups of people who due to "religious intolerance, racial hatred, [or] patriarchy … have become in a sense somehow *less than human*". This vein of conversation was echoed in class discussion about *Fun Home* when we touched upon sexual orientation as a qualifier for either heroism or antiheroism. I think looking at history with a focus on existential antiheroes, those who are antiheroes because of who they are, would be simultaneously chilling and necessary as we look ahead.

"People aren't either wicked or noble. They're like chef's salads, with good things and bad things chopped and mixed together in a vinaigrette of confusion and conflict."
— Lemony Snicket

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