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Writing 135: Living in the Age of the Anti-hero

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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'Etranger*"; 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’Etranger*”, 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

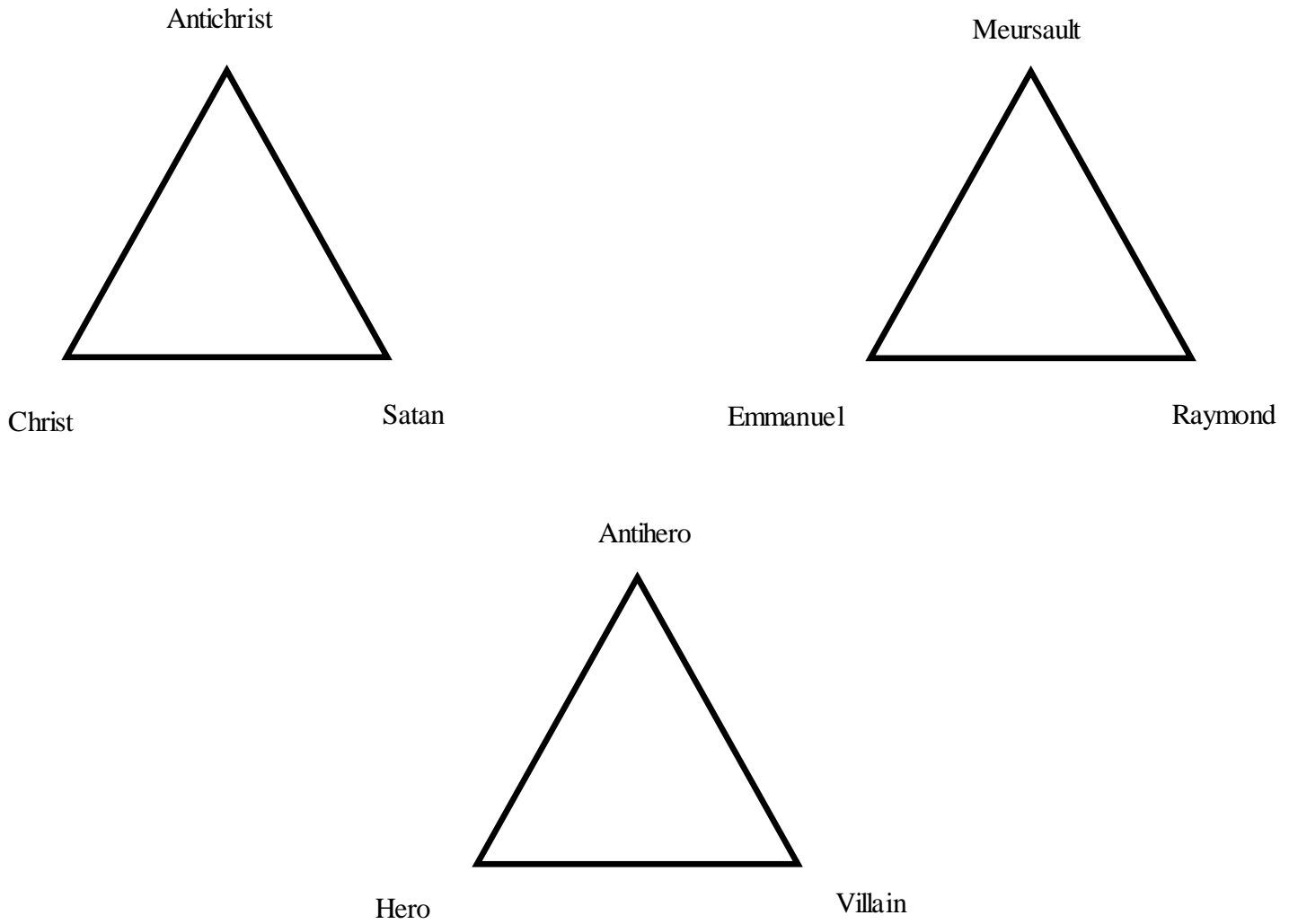
during work, and Meursault also mentions in passing that he and Emmanuel attended the movies together twice in the week preceding the murder (23-24, 31). In his essay, Scherr references that in the Book of Isaiah, the son Mary carries is called Immanuel. He goes on to suggest that Camus's Emmanuel maybe 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



Works Cited:

- Brombert, Victor. "Unheroic Modes." *In Praise of Antiheroes: Figures and Themes in Modern European Literature 1830-1980*. Chicago: U of Chicago, 1999. 1-9. Print.
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