

World Literature Assignment 1
English A1 Higher Level

Examine the characterization of the central characters
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Robert Ludlum commented that “*Characterization is integral to the theatrical experience.*”¹ This rings true in the play Antigone, written by Jean Anouilh, and can be extended to the novel, The Outsider by Albert Camus, since both authors use characterization to important effect. Their manipulation of style, foils, imagery and action to typify the central characters - Meursault and Antigone - intends to disallow emotional attachment to the protagonists. This disassociation is important to both texts because it enables a more objective exploration of the characters predicament.

Camus uses an indirect style of characterization when crafting Meursault; style, imagery and action have to be independently synthesized by the reader to form an audience dependent understanding of the “*inexplicable protagonist*”². From the outset Camus writes using a direct, simple uncomplicated style and colloquially familiar register. Meursault describes sex, an intensely passionate experience “*She had her leg against mine, and I was fondling her breasts... I kissed her, but badly. Afterwards she came back to my place.*”³ yet the imagery is literal, his tone inexpressive, detached and indifferent. The choice of vocabulary accurately conveys Meursault’s thoughts; lacking adjectives and adverbs, Meursault avoids analyzing this life. By telling the story in first person, Camus creates an intimacy with the reader, encouraging belief in Meursault’s lack of pretension as the story traces the development of his internal attitude to the external. This begins in the first lines when his apathetic treatment of life is first revealed “*Maman died today. Or yesterday maybe, I don't know.*”⁴ With this type of simple grammatical structure Camus invites the reader to become part of the excessively simple awareness of Meursault.

¹ Robert Ludlum interview with book-reporter.com, 1997

² Sartre, J. (1955) Literary and Philosophical Essays of Jean-Paul Sartre. Page 111

³ Camus, A. (1942) The Outsider. Page 24

⁴ Camus, A. (1942) The Outsider. Page 9

Through use of literal imagery Camus further defines Meursault's impassive, resigned attitude. When describing Salamano's mangy dog he focusses on the objective truth "*its hair falling out and becoming covered with blotches and scabs*" ⁵. This visual imagery evokes a mental picture of a thoroughly unattractive animal, and yet Meursault makes no judgement as to its visual allure. The same is true of Marie, his mistress. He gives a veristic description of her features but never assesses her aesthetic appeal.

At first glance Meursault's perfunctory existence seems to be the product of an uneducated simpleton as critic Colin Wilson maintains. Instead Camus reminds us this is not so. Meursault's ephemeral comrade, the alleged pimp Raymond Sintes, trusts that the University of Algiers graduate Meursault possesses sufficient intellect and verbal acuity to compose a persuasive letter for Raymond to send to his unfaithful girlfriend ⁶. Rene Girard eloquently summarizes the results of Camus characterization of Meursault, "*The man [Meursault] is, indeed, a derelict; although intelligent, he has no intellectual life, no love, no friendship, no interest in anyone or faith in anything. His life is limited to physical sensations and to cheap pleasures of modern mass culture.*" ⁷

Unlike Meursault's simplistic characterization and resultant nature Antigone is complex, her actions arcane. Anouilh's characterization of Antigone is two fold, often using the voice of the chorus to evoke imagery and comparison against the foils of Creon and Ismene, Anouilh engineers the antithesis of a melodramatic heroine. The Chorus introduces Antigone, "*...the thin dark girl sitting there silent*" and compares her with her sister "*...Ismene - fair haired, beautiful, happy Ismene...*" ⁸ The visually evocative imagery of dark Antigone to light Ismene intensifies the comparison, which

⁵ Camus, A. (1942) The Outsider. Page 30

⁶ Scherr, A. (2001) Explicator 58.3. Page 151

⁷ Girard, R. (1964) Camus Stranger Retried. Page 528

⁸ Anouilh, J. (1987) Antigone. Page 2

he then crystalizes, “...for Ismene is much prettier than Antigone.”⁹ Similar to Anouilh’s other heroines - Eurydice and Joan of Arc - “*Antigone has a boyish physique and curses her girlhood.*”¹⁰ Anouilh compares this to the archetypal blond ingenue embodied in Ismene to emphasize Antigone “...is not like the others” who are always “...preening in-front of the glass, putting rouge on their lips and trying to attract attention.”¹¹ Instead, she possesses a different sort of beauty, a beauty that exerts a chilling fascination, “*Antigone is not beautiful like the rest, but beautiful in a way that stops children in the street.*”¹² This contrast between Antigone and her sister is all the more striking during a live rendition of the play.

As the production runs its fatalistic course (the chorus told us the ending in the prologue) the reason for Antigone’s difference becomes more pronounced. Like Meursault, Antigone rejects societal constraints, symbolized by her repudiation of Creon’s realism in favor of her own idealism; this enables clear comparison between Creon and Antigone. The juxtaposition culminates during Creon’s ‘Ship of State’ where he successively strips Antigone’s act of its religious, political, moral and filial trappings, soliciting Antigone to abandon her gratuitous rebellion in favor of banal conventional happiness. To Creon, one makes his own happiness, the happiness inherent in a grasped tool, success, marriage and family. Antigone is “...disgusted with your happiness! With your life that must go on come what may... a humdrum happiness... I want everything of life... Total; complete. Otherwise I reject it... I want to die!”¹³ Against all human prohibitions, and without reasonable cause, she insists on burying her brother even to the point of her own death. Like her father Oedipus, “*Her insistence on her desire beyond the limits of reason render her ugly, abject, tabooed. In refusing to cede it, she moves outside the human community.*”¹⁴ Anouilh further

⁹ Anouilh, J. (1987) *Antigone*. Page 9

¹⁰ <http://www.liverpoolnetworktheatre.org.uk/antig1.htm>. Retrieved 15/02/09

¹¹ Anouilh, J. (1987) *Antigone*. Page 6

¹² Anouilh, J. (1987) *Antigone*. Page 14

¹³ Anouilh, J. (1987) *Antigone*. Page 47

¹⁴ <http://www.sparknotes.com/drama/antigone/canalysis.html>. Retrieved 01/02/09

reinforces this point by associating her with vivid natural imagery of such acuity it is almost otherworldly, like Antigone herself. xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

Anouilh and Camus, having used dissimilar techniques of characterization when crafting Antigone and Meursault, nevertheless have created protagonists who are ostensibly contrasting, but internally homogeneous. Antigone and Meursault share a fundamental inner characteristic, they are seekers of purity. When society threatens to compromise that purity both choose to transcend the challenge, thereby accepting death. Rejection of typical values ostracizes both from society and estranges from the audience. Antigone possesses favorable and unfavorable qualities which serves to keep the audience at arms length, while Meursault's unreconcilable differences from cultural convention render empathy impossible, thus disassociating us from the central plot. It is this alienation of central characters from the audience achieved through characterization that is important to the texts as a whole.

The result of Camus' characterization of Meursault is a man *"...neither good nor bad, neither moral nor immoral. These categories do not apply to him. He belongs to a very particular species for which the author reserves the word absurd."*¹⁵ This theory of the absurd rests on the asserted premise that since God does not exist, and man dies, therefore everything is permissible. The absurd man lives in the moment, without ambition, hope, illusion, a future or anything to justify. He is innocent, comparable to Somerset Maugham's savages prior to the coming of the cleric who teaches them the distinction between good and evil¹⁶, shackling them with societal constraints, the same bonds which Meursault escapes by shooting The Arab. Camus invites the audience to analyze Meursault by characterizing him as absurd, describing his life rather than analyzing it. This presents the audience with the problem of justifying his actions, in particular the murder of the Arab. So we vainly attempt to judge and analyze him in accordance with our usual standards. This fails because,

¹⁵ Sartre, J. (1955) Literary and Philosophical Essays of Jean-Paul Sartre.

¹⁶ Sartre, J. (1955) Literary and Philosophical Essays of Jean-Paul Sartre.

like Antigone, he lacks reasonable human justification for his actions so we can neither empathize with nor understand him. *"The character retains a real opacity... He is no Don Juan, no Don Quixote of the absurd; He seems like its Sancho Panza. He is there before us, he exists, and we can neither understand nor quite judge him. In a word, he is alive, and all that can justify him to us is his fictional density."*¹⁷ Meursault walks on the fringes, an outsider to society, a stranger to us. The inability of the audience to connect on any level with Meursault forces emotional detachment, important as it enables unbiased reader dependent interpretation of absurdism and the human condition.

Anouilh also alienates Antigone from the spectators as a direct result of her characterization. He removes her from the human community employing the dissociative effect to keep the audience's viewpoint objective. This is achieved by drawing sympathy through positive characteristics while keeping the audience emotionally isolated from Antigone's distressing ordeal by introducing unfavorable aspects to her character. Comparison to Ismene shows us positive traits such as bravery, vulnerability, innocence, naivety and an overriding childlike innocence. Conversely the foil of Creon shows Antigone to be an egotistical, narrow minded zealot lacking sufficient maturity to base judgement on reason rather than emotion. These opposing characteristics act in a similar fashion to the absurdity of Meursault's outlook by reducing our ability to pass judgement upon her, forcing us into a position of emotional neutrality. Antigone's decisions are founded in abstract emotion but Anouilh, by encouraging our neutrality, compels us to assess her predicament using logic and reason, unbiased by emotion.

In Antigone Anouilh uses character foils to emphasize the ambivalent qualities displayed by the protagonist's actions, while in The Outsider Camus focuses style and imagery to render a remarkably candid but culturally distant character in Meursault. Both reject conventional happiness:

¹⁷ Meyers, J. (2004) Somerset Maugham: A life

in doing so Meursault appreciates an inherently absurd world surrounding him while Camus himself eloquently summarized the dilemma presented by Anouilh as “Antigone is right, but Creon is not wrong”. They both become strangers, outsiders to their community and alienated from their audience. This characterization becomes vital to both texts as the author's use it to distance us from an emotional attachment to the individual. By introducing likable and unfavorable characteristics as counterpoint within the individual they neutralize the ability of the audience to associate and empathize with the protagonists. The authors wish us to assess Meursault's and Antigone's respective predicaments in relation to ourselves without the subjective baggage of emotional attachment.