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THE LAST ROCK STAR? DECODING SUBVERSION
IN MARILYN MANSON'S *ANTICHRIST*
TRIPTYCH

by

HANNAH WATERMAN

Presented to the Faculty of the Honors College of
The University of Texas at Arlington in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of

HONORS BACHELOR OF MUSIC IN MUSIC THEORY

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT ARLINGTON

May 2019

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To Dr. Hunt: thank you for your wisdom and support for this project and your guidance throughout my time at the University of Texas at Arlington. I don't know where I would be without your mentorship, but I'm so glad that I've made it to where I am.

To Renae Perry: sweet, sweet Renae, we made it through this together— good times (so many) and bad times (also so many) alike. Thank you for listening to me think through this entire thesis out loud and for hearing out my many conspiracy theories about the *Triptych*. Thank you especially for your friendship, your inspiration, and also for the cat. I love him and you very much.

To my mother, Michelle Harvey: you're just the best.

Thank you as well to Dr. Benjamin Graf and my virtual research group (Natalie Miller and Dr. Rachel Short) for your advice and comments along the way.

Finally, thank you to the devoted fans of Marilyn Manson, without whom this project would not have gotten off the ground. The enthusiasm of the grown-ups I've met who told me about their experiences at Marilyn Manson concerts back in the day fueled me through hardest times of the writing process. Nick Kushner (*The Nachtkabarett*) and the countless anonymous contributors to the Marilyn Manson Wiki and Subreddit paved the way for my research and helped me solve unsolvable puzzles.

My eternal gratitude to all.

April 22, 2019

ABSTRACT

THE LAST ROCK STAR? DECODING SUBVERSION
IN MARILYN MANSON'S *ANTICHRIST*
TRIPTYCH

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The University of Texas at Arlington, 2019

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The traditional notion that music influences ethical character became especially influential in Postwar America, with the emergence of rock music marketed specifically towards rebellious young people. In the rock industry, controversy became lucrative, and the constant profit-oriented drive to subvert the status quo pushed rock music in various extreme directions. This trajectory reached its pinnacle in the late nineties with the emergence of Marilyn Manson, who combined aspects of punk, metal, and electronic music with “shocking” (and sometimes offensive) visual imagery and fiercely contrarian messages. Several journalists have claimed that Marilyn Manson is “the last rock star.” This paper evaluates that claim by identifying the band’s predecessors in the history of rock music and determining some criteria for “rock star” status, analyzing the use of

subversive narrative in Marilyn Manson's *Antichrist* Triptych, and finally arguing that these albums were terminally subversive in their particular lineage of rock music.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|--|------|
| ACKNOWLEDGMENTS | iii |
| ABSTRACT..... | iv |
| LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS..... | viii |
| Chapter | |
| 1. INTRODUCTION | 1 |
| 1.1 Analyzing Narratives in Music | 3 |
| 1.1.1 Analyzing Subversive Narratives | 5 |
| 2. TO BE A ROCK STAR..... | 12 |
| 2.1 A Brief History of Subversion in Rock Music..... | 12 |
| 2.2 What Makes a Rock Star?..... | 18 |
| 3. MARILYN MANSON AND THE TRIPTYCH..... | 20 |
| 3.1 Analyzing Marilyn Manson | 24 |
| 3.1.1 Vocal Timbres..... | 24 |
| 3.1.2 Instrumentation | 29 |
| 3.1.3 Tempo and Meter | 32 |
| 3.2 Guns, God, Government: Narrative Themes in the <i>Antichrist</i> Triptych | 35 |
| 3.3 The <i>Antichrist</i> Triptych..... | 38 |
| 3.3.1 <i>Antichrist Superstar</i> | 38 |
| 3.3.2 <i>Mechanical Animals</i> | 51 |

| | |
|---|----|
| 3.3.3 <i>Holy Wood (In The Shadow Of The Valley Of Death)</i> | 62 |
| 4. THE LAST ROCK STAR | 80 |
| 4.1 Terminal Subversion in the Triptych | 80 |
| 4.2 A Changing Industry..... | 82 |
| 4.3 The Aging Antichrist | 84 |
| REFERENCES | 88 |
| BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION..... | 90 |

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

| Figure | | Page |
|--------|--|------|
| 3.1 | “Four Elements of Vocal Production and Related Terms and Concepts” from Heidemann 2015 | 25 |
| 3.2 | Parameters for Analyzing Vocal Techniques in Marilyn Manson..... | 27 |
| 3.3 | The Worm as Depicted in the <i>Antichrist Superstar</i> Album Booklet | 38 |
| 3.4 | <i>Mechanical Animals</i> dual album covers | 53 |
| 4.1 | Banner Advertisement for <i>Heaven Upside Down</i> (2017) from www.marilynmanson.com | 84 |

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The notion that music influences ethical character dates back to Ancient Greece and has remained relatively constant since then.¹ However, this belief became especially influential in the development of musical culture in twentieth-century America with the emergence of rock music marketed specifically towards young people. The potential for this rowdy, disruptive genre to negatively impact the morality of its audience made it a target for advocates of Christian family values (especially white Christians), which in turn only increased its appeal to youth. For the first time, rebellion was commercialized and marketed to the masses, and controversy became lucrative. The race to produce the most enticingly rebellious music started with the appropriation of the African-American blues for white audiences, continued with the fast-paced, boisterous arrival of punk and the stylized Satanism of metal, and finally led to the emergence of the experimental, genre-defying sounds of industrial metal. This trajectory reached its pinnacle with Marilyn Manson, who combined aspects of punk, metal, and electronic music with shocking (and sometimes blatantly offensive) visual imagery and fiercely subversive messages.² The band's theatrical, phantasmagorical output (especially their live performances) succeeded in sparking outrage and terror in conservative Christian America, culminating with a frenzy

¹ Both Plato (*Republic*, *Timaeus*) and Aristotle (*Politics*) wrote about music and *ethos*.

² "Marilyn Manson" is the name of both the band and its frontman. To avoid confusion throughout this paper, I will use the full name to refer to Marilyn Manson the band, and the last name alone to refer to Marilyn Manson the person.

of media reports in the wake of the Columbine High School shooting that scapegoated Marilyn Manson. Over the course of a trilogy of albums referred to collectively by fans as the *Antichrist* Triptych (*Antichrist Superstar* (1996), *Mechanical Animals* (1996), and *Holy Wood* (2000)), Manson simultaneously established himself as a rock star and subverted the very notion of celebrity.

The general framework of this paper will be an assessment of the claim made by several music journalists³ that Marilyn Manson is “the last rock star.” However, before this claim can be addressed, the term “rock star” itself must be clarified. In general, classifying “rock stars” is a subjective process at best, largely dependent on semantics, perspective, and opinion. As a result, identifying the *last* rock star in any authoritative manner would be impossible without the artificial invocation of specific criteria for “rock star status.” Rather than attempting such a generalization, this paper will argue that Manson was the last of a particular kind of “star” in a particular lineage of “rock,” which relied on subversion of norms *within* white American culture as its driving evolutionary force and culminated with the subgenre of industrial metal.⁴

After examining precedents of industrial metal in the history of rock music and establishing a viable definition for the “rock star,” this paper will focus on the *Antichrist* Triptych, which marked the most successful and controversial era of Marilyn Manson’s career. Each album in the Triptych follows separate narrative with distinct characters and settings, but they are linked by themes of celebrity, transformation, revolution, and

³ To name a few: Jonathan Ames, “The Last Rock Star?” in *SPIN Magazine* (17 May 2007); Anne Donahue, “Why Marilyn Manson Was Our Last Controversial Artist” in *Nylon Magazine* (15 March 2017); Naomi Zeichner, “Rock Stars Went Extinct But Marilyn Manson Is Still Here” in *The Fader* (11 December 2014).

⁴ As opposed to hip hop, which was developed by and marketed towards black audiences.

corruption. In all three albums, Marilyn Manson vilifies both “rock stars” themselves and the cultural systems that produce and distinguish rock stars from the masses. In addition to analyses of overarching narratives and musical trends in the albums, this paper will feature analyses of individual songs as case studies of the specific, recurring techniques that Marilyn Manson uses to represent elements of their subversive narratives. Finally, an evaluation of the current status of the relationship between the music industry and the public will support a brief consideration of how the role of the “rock star” is (or is not) fulfilled in the twenty-first century.

In light of Manson’s exceptionally controversial reputation, I would like to provide a brief clarification of intent. While some of the most shocking stories about Marilyn Manson are unfounded rumors, Manson has inarguably said, sung, and done things that many people did and do find objectionable. Beyond this, the potential for subversive art in a popular setting, especially when it relies heavily on irony, to be taken as glorifying the issues that it is actually criticizing raises questions of moral responsibilities incurred by subversive artists to ensure their work does not inspire acts of violence or hatred. However, the goal of this paper is not to analyze the many ethical considerations and potential ramifications of including violent or offensive material in art. Rather, these performances will be considered objectively, as objects of art that have played a crucial role in the evolution of American culture.

1.1 Analyzing Narratives in Music

Many scholars, including David Nicholls, have problematized an *inherent* narrative function in music. However, Nicholls believes “that music can *become* part of a narrative discourse... where it is ascribed extra-musical meaning through association with an object

or concept...or where it interacts with one or more other media.”⁵ The *Antichrist* Triptych features extraordinarily complex narratives involving both of these types of associations, incorporating meaningful encodings in their composition, lyrics, production, album packaging, marketing materials and live performances. According to Nicholls’ system of classifying narrative levels in music, the Triptych albums are “Level 5” works, which are “a complex narrative discourse...rendered through multiple media, including lyrics, music, prose, and art work,” whose full interpretation requires examination of the relationship between all of these elements.⁶ Responding to Nicholls, Keith Negus proposed that interpreting narrative in music *additionally* requires relating a given work to the larger cultural context to which it belongs.⁷ In analyzing Marilyn Manson, this perspective holds special importance, as references to popular culture and subgenres of rock music are an essential aspect of the *Antichrist* Triptych’s pervasive commentary on celebrity, fame, and media.

The collective title of the three albums emphasizes their multi-medial nature; historically, “triptych” refers to a three-paneled religious art form. This moniker also succinctly summarizes the particular way the albums have been received by the band’s audience. The term connotes “suggestions of saints and princely donors...the triptych’s three-part construction—a central panel with a wing on either side—referred to church architecture, and...it expressed the concept of trinity, significant not just to Christianity,

⁵ David Nicholls, “Narrative Theory as an Analytical Tool in the Study of Popular Music Texts,” in *Music and Letters*, Vol. 88, No. 2 (May 2007), Oxford University Press, pp. 300-301.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 301.

⁷ Keith Negus, “Narrative, Interpretation, and the Popular Song” in *The Musical Quarterly*, Vol. 95, No. 2/3 (2012), Oxford University Press, pp. 368-395.

but humankind.”⁸ The adoption of a term associated with religious visual art to describe a trilogy of rock albums suggests that fans have ascribed a status of reverence for the works. The particular design of the triptych also bears relevance to the exact nature of the relationship between the albums in the *Antichrist* Triptych. Rather than sharing an overarching narrative that spans the albums in a linear, chronological, fashion, the three albums have thematic similarities, each one, on its surface, a different representation of the same narrative of transformation and revolution.

1.1.1 Analyzing Subversive Narratives

While it can be difficult to interpret objective narrative meaning in any music, subversive music presents further challenges for analysts. In producing a type of protest song against social norms, subversive artists focus their *performative* value—that is, the values they appear to endorse through their artistic persona—on the darkest parts of their culture: those which run counter to the “acceptable.” As a result, meaning in this music cannot be decoded accurately using indoctrinated systems of interpretation. Rather, subversive music can only be interpreted by cross-referencing ironic and symbolic messages with more direct representations of the artist’s values.

Subversive musicians that bury intended meaning under irony are especially problematic: not only must their music be approached on its own terms, as it comes from a perspective outside the hegemonic viewpoint, but apparent messages within their work must be cross-referenced with more direct representations. Marilyn Manson offers an exceptionally rich corpus of ironic, subversive music, often complicated by the use of conflicting fictional personas as narrators. Consequently, before a meaningful analysis of

⁸ Grace Glueck, “Art View; The Triptych Lives On In Modern Variations,” *The New York Times* (1 July 1984).

Marilyn Manson's artistic output can be conducted, it will be imperative to construct a method of decoding messages in intentionally subversive music in a meaningful way.

In order to analyze any of Marilyn Manson's music, care must be taken to identify the "narrator" of any given song. In most of their albums, a literary narrative (often involving transformation and revolution) provides an overarching structure, while individual songs come from the perspectives of fictional characters. Even these narrators don't always articulate their positions directly; irony, parody, and hyperbole often characterize their rhetoric. Only once the subject, speaker and their tone have been identified, can meaning as presented in a given song be cross-referenced with Manson's actual personal views as he expresses in interviews, his autobiography, and other, more direct songs. This process is far too arduous to be documented for each individual track in the *Antichrist* Triptych in the context of this paper. Rather, before my analysis of the Triptych narratives, I will establish Manson's views on their major themes broadly. An analysis of "The Nobodies" will serve here as a representative example of the full analysis of subversive narrative that was applied to each song in the Triptych.

Marilyn Manson's fourth studio album, *Holy Wood (In The Shadow Of The Valley Of Death)*, was released in 2000, about a year and a half after the Columbine High School shooting in Littleton, Colorado. The album is largely from the perspective of Adam Kadmon, who is based on the Kabbalist primordial man, an anthropomorphization of divine light and pure potential. It follows Adam's journey out of the "Valley of Death," the land of outcasts, and into "Holy Wood," a parody of Los Angeles where everybody worships dead celebrities, including John F. Kennedy, John Lennon, and, of course, Jesus Christ. Frustrated by feelings of rejection and worthlessness, Adam becomes a

revolutionary leader and takes over Holy Wood, eventually becoming exactly the type of demagogic leader that he hated in the first place.

In “The Nobodies,” the tenth track from *Holy Wood*, Adam makes the decision to conquer Holy Wood by force.⁹ Aware that the media of Holy Wood sensationalizes violence and death, Adam sings (presumably to his followers) the chorus of the song: “We are the nobodies. We wanna be somebodies. When we’re dead, they’ll know just who we are.” The verses use the same melody as the chorus, and the lyrics are only slightly changed between the two verses.

[Verse 1]
Today I am dirty
and I want to be pretty
Tomorrow, I know that I'm just dirt

[Verse 2]
Yesterday I was dirty
wanted to be pretty
I know now that I'm forever dirt

However, this repetitive structure starkly highlights a perspective shift that occurs when the melody and chord progression both change suddenly at the bridge of the song. Rather than coming from the first-person perspective of the outcast-turned-revolutionary, the bridge reports from an observer’s perspective that “some children died” and remarks on how their society “mourned” the tragedy by turning it into entertainment—a profitable media spectacle. The song shifts back to Adam’s perspective for a final chorus section before the song ends.

“The Nobodies” is fairly slow, but not extremely slow by any means. The beat is simultaneously driven forward by constant eighth-note subdivision in the melodic

⁹ Marilyn Manson, “The Nobodies,” *Holy Wood (In The Shadow Of The Valley Of Death)*. Nothing Records: 490 790-2, 2000, CD.

accompaniments and held back by a “heartbeat” motive in the kick drum and bass on beats 1 and 2, which in the context of the rock music are considered to be the weak beats. Overall, this steady accompaniment supports the resolute tone of the first narrator.

The instrumentation of the song builds up slowly, starting with the “heartbeat” motive alone, then adding melodic synthesizer. In the second repetition of the first verse, some faint noise sounds generated by distorted electric guitar are layer onto this initially sparse texture. The chorus implements the full force of the amplified rock ensemble.

Manson’s vocal timbres mirror the incremental build-up of the instrumentation. The first verse begins with breathy underproduction, and gradually pushes into overproduction. At the chorus, Manson’s voice leaps up an octave and reaches a peak of overproduction. As stated earlier, the same somewhat monotonous melody is used throughout the verses and chorus; however, the changes in vocal timbre and instrumentation prevent the song from becoming boring. The increasing intensity mirrors a transformation from uncertainty to resolution in the narrator.

After the first chorus, both the instrumentation and vocal timbres drop down to a lower level of intensity and build back up again for the second chorus. However, in the bridge after this second chorus, the full instrumentation and vocal register are retained, and Manson pushes *further* into overproduction, reaching a maximal level of “scream.” Based on my analysis of the lyrics, there is also a narrative shift from Adam to an observer of the aftermath. Despite the wry tone of the text, the mood created by the *musical sound* matches and even goes beyond the intensity and anger of the peak of the chorus.

In the breakdown following the bridge, the intensity of both instrumentation and vocal production suddenly drop to the same levels as the introduction; Manson uses a

breathy sound to sing wordless vocalizations over drum machine and the original synth hook.

The final return of the chorus stands out amongst the prior iterations. At first, it retains the lower-octave version of the melody and features only light overproduction, rather than the screams of previous choruses. The instrumentation barely changes from the breakdown. Grouped with the breakdown, it starkly juxtaposes the intensity of the bridge and the preceding music. However, at the lyric “When we’re dead...” the full instrumentation and higher-register screams return in full force, with the effect of summarizing the musical processes of the song as a whole. Through this contrast, Manson distinguishes the tones of the two narrators: the anger and consequent resolve of Adam to be remembered through violence, and the dryly-worded but furious-sounding critique of the public’s response in the aftermath.

The lyrical content of the verses and chorus (that is, the parts of the song written from Adam’s perspective) are based on quotes from two known murderers. First, the verses are based on a line from serial killer Carl Panzram’s suicide note.¹⁰ Second, Mark David Chapman, who assassinated John Lennon, repeatedly iterated that his motivation was that he “felt like a nobody” and thought that killing Lennon would make him “a somebody.”¹¹

However, it’s reasonable to assume that the murderers who most directly inspired “The Nobodies” were the Columbine High School shooters. While Marilyn Manson was widely scapegoated as the inspiration for the shooters, he disputed this point in many interviews in the months following the massacre. Manson explains his particular criticisms

¹⁰ Carl Panzram, letter to Henry Lesser, June 20, 1930 in *Lustmord: The Writings and Artifacts of Murderers*, ed. Brian King (1997), pp. 208-209.

¹¹ “Lennon’s killer Chapman ‘wanted to become somebody,’” BBC US & Canada (September 17, 2010), accessed April 1, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-11337077>.

of the hypocrisy of the Columbine reporting in an interview in Michael Moore's documentary *Bowling for Columbine*. In the interview, he expresses sympathy for the killers, as their violence was a product of larger social issues:

The two by-products of that whole tragedy were violence in entertainment and gun control, and how perfect that that was the two things that we were going to talk about with the upcoming election. And also, then we forgot about Monica Lewinsky and we forgot about the president shooting bombs overseas... I think that's really ironic, that nobody said, "Well, maybe the president had an influence on this violent behavior. Because that's not the way the media wants to take it and spin it and turn it into fear... You're watching television, you're watching the news; you're being pumped full of fear and there's floods, there's AIDS, there's murder. You cut to commercial, buy the Acura, buy the Colgate. If you have bad breath, they're not going to talk to you. If you got pimples, the girl's not going to fuck you. It's a campaign of fear and consumption."¹²

While Manson doesn't explicitly condemn the actions of the shooters in his *Bowling for Columbine* interview, in an open letter in *Rolling Stone* magazine published two months after the shooting, he stated, "A lot of people forget or never realize that I started my band as a criticism of these very issues of despair and hypocrisy. The name Marilyn Manson has never celebrated the sad fact that America puts killers on the cover of *Time* magazine, giving them as much notoriety as our favorite movie stars. From Jesse James to Charles Manson, the media, since their inception, have turned criminals into folk heroes. They just created two new ones when they plastered those dip-shits Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris' pictures on the front of every newspaper. Don't be surprised if every kid who gets pushed around has two new idols."¹³

Although on the surface of "The Nobodies," Manson takes on the persona of an outcast with violent intentions, this is merely artistic representation. At the same time, a

¹² Michael Moore, Interview with Marilyn Manson, *Bowling for Columbine*, DVD, Los Angeles: MGM Distribution Co., (2002).

¹³ Marilyn Manson, "Columbine: Whose Fault Is It?" *Rolling Stone* (24 June 1999).

second perspective in the song responds to the tragedy caused by that violent individual, decrying the lack of respect the media had for the event in the aftermath. Outside of his music, Manson clearly and explicitly condemns violence. However, he criticizes not individuals but large-scale social conditions that incite individuals to lash out.

In creating a song from the perspective of a radicalized outcast, Manson gave voice to “The Nobodies.” He offered sympathy where there was none. Furthermore, he pointed to the larger patterns of American culture that lead the rejected to lash out against society rather than blaming the “nobodies” themselves. Obviously, the primary narrator in “The Nobodies” harbors violent intentions. However, as with any work of literature, the narrator cannot be equated with Manson himself without close scrutiny and analysis. Through both literary and musical analysis, two narrators in “The Nobodies” are revealed: the voice of “the nobodies” and the voice of the aftermath.

CHAPTER 2

TO BE A ROCK STAR

“Hey, Mister Superstar,
I’m your number one fan...
Hey, mister big rock star,
I wanna grow up just like you.”

Marilyn Manson, “Mister Superstar” (*Antichrist Superstar*)

2.1 A Brief History of Subversion in Rock Music

The label of “rock” can be accurately applied to an almost impossibly broad corpus of popular music originating with the category’s circa-1950s namesake, rock and roll. In the Grove entry on rock music, Richard Middleton identifies three main “dimensions” of rock:

Sociologically, it is a commercially-produced popular music aimed at an exclusionary youth audience of a type characteristic of late-capitalist societies. Musically, it tends to be highly amplified, with a strong beat and rhythmic patterns commonly considered erotic, and to draw heavily on proto-folk (especially African-American) musical sources from Southern USA. Ideologically, it is associated with an aesthetic programme of ‘authenticity’, developing elements from discourses around folk-revival (‘community’, ‘roots’) and art music (‘originality’, ‘personal expression’, ‘integrity’).¹⁴

As rock music developed during the second half of the twentieth century, new stages of its evolution were marked by a revolution against the “old” style. Each new era of rock was characterized by controversy, a phenomenon of reception which indicates that subversion was coded into the music in some way— that is to say, emergent styles

¹⁴ Richard Middleton, “Rock,” *Grove Music Online* (2001), accessed March 29, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.49135>.

and subgenres of rock music challenged the social norms and genre standards of its predecessors and of society as a whole. As a strain of popular music marketed specifically towards youth, elements of conservatism shown any given rock band meant that their music would be less appealing. This resulted in a seemingly endless cycle of new rock music being demonized or deemed *too* outrageous and immoral by authorities, then that style being commercialized for the wider public palate, and consequently losing its original audience. Then, a *new* new style of rock music emerged that challenged its predecessors in innovative ways, and the process repeated. At each of these stages of subversive succession, the “old” genre loses its political power of dissent and revolution (its “authenticity”). As new bands intentionally subvert the standards of previous ones, once-innovative acts start to seem too conservative to appeal to young people hungry for the chance to rebel. Rock music in this context can be partially understood as a special type of protest music, critical not only of musical norms but of social norms as a whole.

The earliest rock and roll music developed in the American South, and “is often described as a merger of black rhythm and blues with white country music... some historians argue that rock and roll began in the early 1950s, when many white teenagers began listening and dancing to rhythm and blues.”¹⁵ The term “typically served as a euphemism for sex” in its first appearances in blues lyrics, almost two decades prior to the emergence of the first music to be marketed as “rock and roll.”¹⁶ Thus, from its beginnings, rock was associated with eroticism; its first morally-bolstered detractors complained of its sexual overtones and associations with African-American culture. In fact, Asa Earl Carter,

¹⁵ Robert Walser, “Rock and roll,” *Oxford Music Online: Grove Music Online* (2001), accessed March 29, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.49136>.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

the head of the Alabama White Citizens Council, denounced rock and roll as “sensuous black music” and “claimed that it was endangering the moral structure of Christianity.”¹⁷ Of course, these concerns also gave the first rock and roll records by white musicians their lucrative appeal. Sam Phillips (Elvis Presley’s first producer) reportedly said over and over, “If I could find a white man who had the Negro sound and the Negro feel, I could make a billion dollars.”¹⁸

From these transgressive roots, many subgenres of rock developed over the rest of the twentieth century. The evolution of heavy metal, punk, and glam rock, in particular, were primarily shaped by the cycle of subversion described earlier, and were by no coincidence the main influences on industrial bands. These three genres are, to varying degrees, related to the broader category of hard rock. An outline of the history of metal, punk, and glam, and their particular musical and social subversions, will be necessary for an understanding of the significance of Marilyn Manson.

Hard rock emerged as distinct from mainstream rock in the late 1960s, long after the initial cultural shock of rock and roll had worn off. Initially “a response to and development of the prevailing counter-culture,” hard rock was louder and “heavier” than its predecessors due to the use of “deep-tuned drums...ringing cymbals played with a marked absence of local syncopation...declamatory vocals...guitar riffs, power chords and boogie patterns.”¹⁹ Garage rock, “which originally flourished in the [American] Midwest during the mid-1960s [combined] elements of amateurism, angst-ridden teenage attitude,

¹⁷ Dick Weissman, *Talkin' 'Bout A Revolution*, Milwaukee: Backbeat Books (2010), p. 271.

¹⁸ Peter Guralnick, “Elvis Presley,” in *The Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock & Roll (Revised and Updated)*, New York: Random House (1980), p. 25.

¹⁹ Allan F. Moore, “Hard rock” in *Oxford Music Online: Grove Music Online* (2001), accessed 14 April, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.46249>.

and a fundamental desire for musical authenticity.”²⁰ Psychedelic guitarists, such as Jimi Hendrix, used “warped, distorted, and unfixed” timbres, making a much broader timbral palette available to later hard rock bands.²¹ Psychedelic bands also began to push rock music into more taboo thematic territory through their visual and aural encodings of LSD experiences.

In mid-seventies, a few younger bands leaned in to the unrefined sound of garage rock, combining it with the “Do It Yourself” movement, snarky humor, and underlying socio-political critiques to form the beginnings of the punk subgenre. Aestheticized teenage rebellion, anti-authoritarian ideologies, and aggressive, noisy sounds set apart punk music. Punk stood against mainstream rock, which by the mid-seventies “had become middle class and middle aged, more concerned with profit which it found in the persona of a “respectable, grown-up art form.”²² Terry Atkinson summarized the particular subversions of punk musicians:

“Punk put the rebellion back into rock, adding an injection of raw, enraged energy, laced, at least sometimes, with a smirking humour. Rejecting the overblown sounds of their contemporaries, the punk bands went back to basics, unleashing a barrage of short, sharp songs that struck a chord with a generation of angry, angst-ridden teenagers.”²³

Atkinson’s reference to “overblown sounds” alludes to the genre of heavy metal music, which “developed a more distorted guitar sound and heavier drums and bass” in the

²⁰ Garrett Thorson, “Garage rock” *Oxford Music Online: Grove Music Online* (2013), accessed 14 April 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.A2241224>.

²¹ Jacob A. Cohen, “Psychedelic rock” in *Oxford Music Online: Grove Music Online* (2001), accessed April 14, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.A2267498>.

²² Christine King, “Blue Suede Shoes to Doc Marten Boots,” *Implicit Religion*, vol. 19, no. 1 (2016), p. 103.

²³ Terry Atkinson, “Punk rock” in *Encyclopedia of Music in the 20th Century*, ed. Stacey and Henderson, London: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers (1999), p. 506.

early seventies.²⁴ Metal music was slower and louder than contemporary styles of rock, and the introduction of the power chord gave metal a distinctly “thicker” sound by adding notes a fifth and an octave above melodic guitar lines. Amongst the early pioneers of metal, including Led Zeppelin and Deep Purple, Black Sabbath in particular stands out as a predecessor of Marilyn Manson. They broke away from the comparatively more socially-acceptable subjects of eroticism and delinquency that had previously dominated rock, instead choosing “brooding lyrics that dealt with evil, war, pain, and drug addiction.” Their rhythms were slow and severe, their guitars were heavily distorted, and Ozzy Osbourne’s “distinctive paranoid whine” helped the band form a unique musical identity.²⁵ Furthermore, Black Sabbath built a Satanic aesthetic into their identity, which not only gave them their name, but saturated their music and visual appearances. However, despite their amoral reputation, music critic Lester Bangs (who is often attributed with coining the term “heavy metal”) identified them as “a band with a conscience who have looked around them and taken it upon themselves to reflect the chaos in a way that they see as positive.”²⁶ As I will later argue, Marilyn Manson fulfilled a nearly-identical position in the late nineties.

Meanwhile, glam rock, pioneered by the New York Dolls and David Bowie, subverted the “excessive machismo” that had come to characterize hard rock.²⁷ Glam bands stood out from the masses of hard rockers with androgynous presentations and flamboyant,

²⁴ Walser, Robert. “Heavy metal,” *Oxford Music Online: Grove Music Online* (2001), accessed March 30, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.49140>.

²⁵ Robert Walser, “Black Sabbath,” *Oxford Music Online: Grove Music Online* (2001), accessed March 30, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.49143>.

²⁶ Lester Bangs, “Bring your Mother To The Gas Chamber,” *CREEM Magazine* (June 1972), p. 44.

²⁷ Allan Moore, “Glam Rock,” *Oxford Music Online: Grove Music Online* (2001), accessed March 30, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.46248>.

theatrical performances that relied on the use of dramatic personas. Later glam rockers also began to incorporate electronic synthesizers into their sound, blurring the lines between dance music and rock music.

Goth rock came out of the punk scene in the UK in the late seventies. Early gothic rockers borrowed “from punk’s intense, pared-down musical aesthetic...but [added] darker lyrical themes and more expressive, atmospheric musical elements inspired by the nihilistic post-punk band Joy Division.”²⁸ However, unlike heavy metal, early goth music tended to be much sparser in texture, and relied more on glam-inspired theatrical elements to support the darkness and melancholia of their lyrics. Goth rock is the clearest and most direct predecessor of industrial metal, and Alexander Carpenter even identifies Nine Inch Nails and Marilyn Manson as “recent American groups that manifest a gothic impulse or aesthetic.”²⁹

Industrial metal incorporated the experimental sound palette of psychedelic, the distinctive riffs (and occasionally the thick sound) of heavy metal, the snarky humor and political undertones of punk, and the morbidity (and occasionally the sparse textures) of goth. Marilyn Manson in particular was heavily influenced by the theatrical and persona-driven performances of glam rock. In blending stylistic aspects of other genres, industrial music has potential to invoke an aspect of protest music identified by Christine King: “a merging of genres to create something new that awakens an understanding of the power of music to a different audience.”³⁰

²⁸ Alexander Carpenter, “Goth rock,” Oxford Music Online: *Grove Music Online* (2013), accessed April 14, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.A2262356>.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Christine King, “Blue Suede Shoes to Doc Marten Boots,” *Implicit Religion* vol. 19, no. 1 (2016), p. 103.

2.2 What Makes a Rock Star?

Throughout the history of rock music, certain individuals rose up above the rest. They balanced the sacred and the profane perfectly within their identities, and commanded the worship of their audiences. They maintained a particular and paradoxical relationship with the public by using cultural subversion to attain a position of cultural authority. They were the figureheads of rock culture (and, arguably, of American culture as a whole, in their prime): the rock stars. The systematic classification of “rock stars” in general is a subjective process at best, largely dependent on opinion and semantics. As a result, identifying the *last* rock star in any authoritative manner would be impossible without the artificial invocation of specific criteria for “rock star status.” Rather than attempting such a generalization, this paper will argue that Manson was the last of a particular kind of “star” in the particular lineage I have established of subversive rock.

In a 1989 article in the *LA Times*, music critic Jonathan Gold alludes to the phenomenon by contrasting Guns N’ Roses with Def Leppard:

Def Leppard sells even more albums than Guns N’ Roses, but nobody tries to read meaning into their lyrics or interpret their phenomenon. Hardly anybody knows what their lead singer’s name is, much less cares about his politics. Def Leppard’s just a rock band that people enjoy.³¹

In contrast to Joe Elliott of Def Leppard, Axl Rose was a popular culture icon. The public was interested in Rose *as an individual*, not just in relationship to the music of Guns N’ Roses. Media speculation about the personal lives of these musicians gives them an air of unattainability, glamour, and mysticism. However, unlike most other cultural icons, subversive rock stars achieve their status by undermining cultural norms. The public

³¹ Jonathan Gold, “Guns N’ Posers: L.A. Hard Rock Evolves” in *The Los Angeles Times* (15 October 1989), accessed April 10, 2019, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1989-10-15-ca-483-story.html>.

becomes interested in rock stars as individuals because their music defies social expectations for proper behavior, leading to a fascination and intrigue as to what the musicians are “actually like.” The rock star, as defined for the purposes of this paper, results from this paradoxical relationship between musicians and audiences: the rock star attains a celebrated cultural status while maintaining an oppositional viewpoint, expressed through subversive music.

CHAPTER 3

MARILYN MANSON AND THE TRIPTYCH

“America loves to find an icon to hang its guilt on. But, admittedly, I have assumed the role of Antichrist; I am the Nineties voice of individuality, and people tend to associate anyone who looks and behaves differently with illegal or immoral activity... It’s comical that people are naive enough to have forgotten Elvis, Jim Morrison, and Ozzy so quickly.”

— “Columbine: Whose Fault Is It?” by Manson in *Rolling Stone*

Like Black Sabbath, Marilyn Manson can be seen as “a band with a conscience who have looked around them and taken it upon themselves to reflect the chaos in a way that they see as positive.”³² However, Marilyn Manson reflects the “chaos” of American celebrity culture and neoliberal politics in the nineties. Tiffany Naiman has observed and described the political component of Marilyn Manson’s ideology at length in her article “Camp Fascism.” She argues that while Marilyn Manson (among several other industrial bands) adopted elements of fascist aesthetics and rhetoric, they reveal these allusions to be “camp” theatrics by exaggerating and undermining their performances of fascism to the point of parody. “The iconography traditionally associated with power, purity, and idealized images of the human form,” Naiman writes, “is appropriated and paired with the abject by Manson.”³³ The band uses “camp fascism” to highlight the capacity, and even willingness, of their audience to succumb to a charismatic leader and fall under tyrannical rule. In fact, the first song of the *Antichrist* Triptych, fan favorite “Irresponsible Hate

³² Lester Bangs, “Bring your Mother To The Gas Chamber,” *CREEM Magazine* (June 1972), p. 44.

³³ Tiffany Naiman, “Camp Fascism: The Tyranny of the Beat,” *Songs of Social Protest*, ed. Aileen Dillane et al., London: Rowman & Littlefield (2018), p. 348.

Anthem,” declares “I am so all-American, I’d sell you suicide...I am totalitarian.”³⁴ The personas adopted by Manson throughout the Triptych are similarly transparent in their malice and hatred. However, the trilogy’s commercial success testifies to a successful seduction of a significant portion of the American public, and outside of his music, Manson called himself “the nineties voice of individuality” and condemns violence.³⁵ The contradiction between Manson’s personal views and the tyrannical personas he adopts in the *Antichrist* Triptych beget careful, critical analysis of the trilogy.

Despite his high degree of visibility and commercial success, Manson maintained a consistently “freaky” persona. As he maintained this balancing act of cultural subversion and commercial appeal, Manson’s entire career expressed both an earnest criticism of mainstream culture and a caricature of the rock stars that preceded him. This reflection of chaos manifests especially directly in “The Beautiful People,” the lead single from *Antichrist Superstar*. The song epitomizes Marilyn Manson’s archetypal style, with a driving, militaristic drum beat, a distinctive chromatically-inflected guitar riff, and a wide variety of extreme vocal techniques. “The Beautiful People” establishes the album’s narrative setting, describing a shallow and plutocratic society (a metaphor for the contemporary economic and social condition of America so thinly veiled that it can almost be taken as literal). The aggressive and sardonic tone of the song’s narrator also introduces the perspective of the album’s main protagonist, who feels rejected by society and consequently resentful of the so-called beautiful people:

The weak ones are there to justify the strong: the beautiful people, the beautiful people... The horrible people, the horrible people— it’s all anatomic as the size of your steeple. Capitalism has made it this way; old-

³⁴ Marilyn Manson, “Irresponsible Hate Anthem,” *Antichrist Superstar*, Nothing Records INTD-90086, 1996, CD.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, “Columbine: Whose Fault Is It?” in *Rolling Stone Magazine* (24 June 1999).

fashioned fascism will take it away. Hey, you, what do you see? Something beautiful or something free?³⁶

“The Beautiful People” was inspired by a book of the same name by Marilyn Bender (1967) which “exposed the lives of the emerging Jet Set in all their profligate, trivial—yet gripping—glory.”³⁷ In a feature about the song in *Kerrang!* magazine, Manson said:

The term 'The Beautiful People' was inspired by a book that came out in the mid-'60s. It was about the Kennedys, politics and fashion at the time. The whole culture of beauty as being created at the time. We live in a world where the culture of beauty is taken for granted, but it didn't exist in the same way in the '60s. Then Charles Manson and his 'family' took that culture, hated it and reacted against it. In many ways, his reaction is the same as mine, but I'm playing with it from both sides. I make things glamorous as a revolt to glamour.³⁸

Marilyn Manson has always been critical of the tendency in American media to glorify violence and hatred alongside “the beautiful people,” through sensational reporting that turned criminals into celebrities. They incorporated this juxtaposition of glamour and grime into the core of their identity through their choice of pseudonyms. The frontman of the band took on the pseudonym Marilyn Manson for his musical persona and abandoned his given name, Brian Warner, entirely; the band itself was named after the frontman (in the tradition of Alice Cooper). The moniker alludes to Marilyn Monroe and Charles Manson; the rest of the band members constructed similar names for themselves, following the same pattern of female celebrity plus male serial killer (examples include Madonna Wayne Gacy, Olivia Newton Bundy, and Twiggy Ramirez).

³⁶ Ibid., “The Beautiful People,” *Antichrist Superstar*, Nothing Records INTD-90086, 1996, CD.

³⁷ Steven Daly, “The Book That Started The Madness,” *The Telegraph* (3 February 2008), accessed April 14, 2019, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/donotmigrate/3670958/The-book-that-started-the-madness.html>.

³⁸ Marilyn Manson, “How I Wrote It... The Beautiful People.” *Kerrang!* (28 May 2005).

Marilyn Manson followed in the footsteps of Trent Reznor's band, Nine Inch Nails. In fact, Reznor discovered Marilyn Manson, signed them to his label "Nothing Records" and produced their first charting album, *Antichrist Superstar*. Marilyn Manson combined the "digestibility" of industrial (as compared with the more extreme sound of heavy metal)—often drawing on a more relaxed grunge sound that had seen success with bands like Nirvana— with extreme messages and freakish visuals. The band embraced a visual and musical aesthetic of the grotesque, using distorted vocal and instrumental timbres drawn from a menagerie of sources and techniques and drawing on imagery from both the most sacred and the most taboo institutions of culture.³⁹

The term "grotesque" carries heavy literary baggage—in *Fiction of the Modern Grotesque*, Bernard McElroy identifies it as "in [the] most limited sense...a type of decorative art combining human features with lithe beasts and fantastic birds in a filigree of vines and curlicues" and "in colloquial usage...anything unseemly, disproportionate, or in bad taste."⁴⁰ "Grotesque" connotes "a game with the absurd...the spirit of carnival which distorts and defuses all that is terrible...a sense of the uncanny."⁴¹ Jean-Paul Sartre argued that "to render an object as grotesque is to situate it in a world which is grotesque."⁴² According to Sartre, the grotesque evokes an experience of horror because it reflects a horrific world. Depictions of the grotesque force confrontation with aspects of reality that are usually hidden or ignored for the sake of comfort. The *Antichrist* Triptych incorporated the grotesque in all of these senses: in the "limited sense," in visual and rhetorical

³⁹ To name just a few examples, the band has paired medical equipment with sexually-charged BDSM fashion, Christian imagery with horrific gore, and revered cultural figures with Nazi iconography.

⁴⁰ Bernard McElroy, *Fiction of the Modern Grotesque*, New York: St. Peter's Press (1989), p.1.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 2-4

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 5.

depictions of the Worm, the insectile protagonist of *Antichrist Superstar*, and in “the colloquial usage” in Manson’s strained and guttural vocal production, his strange costuming, and in the band’s frequent juxtaposition of the sacred and the profane.

In becoming “Marilyn Manson,” Brian Warner allowed his performative persona to supersede his personal identity. He became, in equal and often corresponding parts, an embodiment of the fears of the American public and the “nineties voice of individuality.”⁴³ Then, in creating the band’s music, the expressive liberties of narrative perspective are explored from the starting point of Marilyn Manson, an already oppositional viewpoint. Consequently, the narratives of the *Antichrist* Triptych are often doubly subversive, with an oppositional “author” (Manson) writing oppositional characters (the seditious protagonists of the *Triptych*). Manson’s level of agreement with the perspectives of his fictional personas varies from personal identification, in which the character’s views are indistinguishable from his own, to ironic identification, in which the character presents beliefs that are opposite to Manson’s.

3.1 Analyzing Marilyn Manson

3.1.1 Vocal Timbres

One of the most distinctive features of Marilyn Manson is the unusual variety and extremity of vocal techniques the singer uses to transform his natural voice into something perceived as grotesque or monstrous. Manson tests the limits of his vocal range by using both the extreme highs and lows of his natural baritone register (falsetto and vocal fry, respectively). He uses dramatic over- and underproduction, with exaggerated screams and melodramatic whispers. Furthermore, the recorded voice is occasionally distorted through

⁴³ Marilyn Manson, “Columbine: Whose Fault Was It?” in *Rolling Stone Magazine* (24 June 1999).

electronic means to achieve an even less human sound. Throughout the *Antichrist* Triptych, Manson switches frequently and unpredictably between different combinations of extreme techniques and a more natural or “expected” melodic, male, rock voice, often corresponding to shifts in tone or narrator.

| Element of Vocal Production (Perceived) | Related Timbral Classifications | Some Related Elements of Vocal Performance |
|--|--|---|
| Movement of true vocal folds <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - manner of vibration as impacted by degrees of adduction and tension, air flow Vibration in the ventricular (“false”) folds, aryepiglottic folds, and epiglottis | <u>General:</u> breathy hissing, grainy whisper harsh hoarse creaky, vocal fry supraglottic distortion: scream, growl breaks <u>Onset:</u> breathy creaky glottal smooth | Paralinguistic ornament, pitch |
| Position of vocal tract <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - larynx height - larynx tilt - pharynx area - velum height - mouth position (lips, tongue, jaw) | oral twang nasal twang speech-like sob | Pitch, vibrato, lyrics, phonemes, accent, enunciation |
| Sympathetic vibration <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - head - face, nasal passages - neck, chest | nasal resonant whistle falsetto head mix chest | Pitch, melody, dynamics |
| Breath support and muscular anchoring | (usually implied in other timbre descriptors, like belt or breathy) | Dynamics, paralinguistic ornament |

Figure 3.1: “Four Elements of Vocal Production and Related Terms and Concepts” from Heidemann 2015

Manson's use of extreme techniques simplifies the challenges of perceptual timbral analysis identified by Kate Heidemann (summarized in Figure 1, above). Heidemann argues that “vocal timbre telegraphs the interior state of a moving body, presenting the listener with blueprints for ways of being and feeling... the feeling of listening to vocal

timbre leads to identification with, as well as enjoyment of, a recorded song.”⁴⁴ The distinct use of extreme areas of the vocal production allows for a comparison of Manson's voice *to itself*, which in combination with a basic understanding of the physiological structures of the normative human voice enables a systematic identification of both moderate and extreme timbres. If Heidemann’s system for describing vocal timbre in popular music is applied to Manson’s voice, then the listener would be compelled to imagine snarls, gruesome distortions, and other unnatural manipulations of the human voice. Imagining what it would feel like to produce those sounds forcibly removes Manson’s audience from a hegemonic perspective and instead mandates a confrontation with the grotesque. In analyzing the vocal timbres used by Manson, which, while widely varied, generally fall into a limited range of categories within several salient parameters, Heidemann’s complex, physiology-based model of perception can be bypassed by creating a model of reference particular to Manson’s output and voice.

Three particular categories of vocal techniques supported the analysis of literary tone in Marilyn Manson’s *Antichrist* Triptych (Figure 2, below). First, Manson’s pitch contours range from clear melodic lines, to semi-melodic lines (which have limited changes in pitch), to chant (which features primarily static pitch), to spoken (which has no pitch at all, in the usual musical sense). Second, the main vocals in Marilyn Manson typically come from the chest registers of Manson’s baritone vocal range, but these mid-register vocals are often doubled either an octave below, in a register known as vocal fry, or an octave above, in the falsetto range. Some of the most striking moments in Marilyn Manson’s discography come when one of these extreme registers is isolated and consequently

⁴⁴ Kate Heidemann, “A System for Describing Vocal Timbre in Popular Song,” *Music Theory Online*, vol. 22, no. 1 (March 2016).

highlighted. Finally, Manson frequently either overproduces his singing, resulting in an abrasive screaming sound, or underproduces, resulting in a breathy whispering sound.

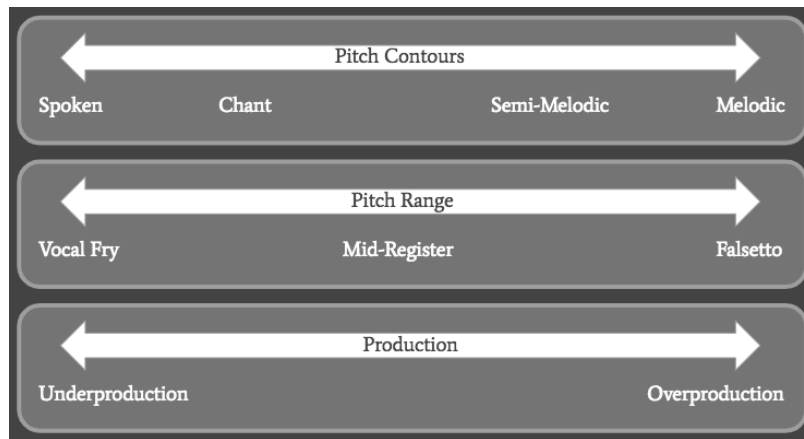


Figure 3.2: Parameters for Analyzing Vocal Techniques in Marilyn Manson

“Mister Superstar” from *Antichrist Superstar* demonstrates the full range of Manson’s vocal techniques.⁴⁵ The introduction of the song (“Hey, Mister Superstar” to “I’m your number one fan”) features semi-melodic, mid-register, underproduced vocals. Most of the first verse (from “Hey, Mister Porno Star” to “Hey, Mister Big Rock Star”) is also semi-melodic and mid-register, but the vocal production changes to a natural range. At the last line of the of the verse (“I wanna grow up just like you”), Manson moves to a higher register and begins to overproduce his singing, continuing to do so during the chorus (“I know that I can turn you on / I wish I could just turn you off / I never wanted this”). However, during the chorus, a distinct melody emerges, accompanied by a narrative shift from the Superstar’s adoring, obsessive fans to the protagonist of the album. Manson returns to the original limited melody but continues to use overproduction in the second verse (“Hey, Mister Super Hate” to “I want to be your little girl”). In this second verse-chorus rotation, Manson also begins to manipulate the parameter of pitch, leaping up and

⁴⁵ Marilyn Manson, “Mister Superstar,” *Antichrist Superstar*, Nothing Records INTD-90086, 1996, CD.

down by octave on alternating lines. At the end of the extended second chorus section (“I never never never wanted this”), Manson’s pitch climbs up into the extreme highs of his register. The ambient vocals of the song’s breakdown demonstrate both unpitched whispers (“Will you kill yourself on T.V.?”) and vocal fry (“I wish I was dead”). Halfway through the breakdown, Manson echoes the verses with low-register, lightly overproduced chanting (“Hey, Mister Superstar, I’ll kill myself for you”). During the line, “I’ll kill you if I can’t have you,” Manson rapidly climbs into his highest register and reaches a peak of overproduction in the song.

The effect of gradually-accumulating intensity produced by Manson’s vocal techniques supports the narrative function of the song. By this point in the album, the protagonist has become a celebrity, but is beginning to realize that the attention that comes with super-stardom can be terrifying. The protagonist grows increasingly frustrated with the sycophantic adoration of the masses over the course of the two verse-chorus rotations, and in the breakdown, reveals the undercurrents of malicious obsession that celebrities can be subject to.

In some tracks, vocal techniques are varied in apparently random patterns and at much faster rates, with the effect of characterizing the narrator as unstable, volatile or frivolous. An example application occurs in the post-chorus hook of “Disposable Teens” (*Holy Wood*).⁴⁶ Manson repeats the phrase, “We’re disposable teens” ad nauseum, changing from a low register to a sing-song falsetto for the word “teens.” As Manson repeats the phrase, he begins to overproduce his singing, and achieves in just thirteen seconds of music the same accumulation in intensity that took course over the entire

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, “Disposable Teens,” *Holy Wood (In The Shadow Of The Valley Of Death)*, Nothing Records: 490 790-2, 2000, CD.

duration of “Mister Superstar.” The mock-frivolity of the “Disposable Teens” hook fits the caustic tone of the narrator (“I wanna thank you mom, I wanna thank you dad, for bringing this fucking world to a bitter end,” he sings in the first verse). Its transformation into a screaming outburst summarizes the narrator’s fury at being dismissed and intention to prove the power of youth (“The more that you fear us, the bigger we get, and don’t be surprised when we destroy all of it”).

3.1.2 Instrumentation

While Manson’s vocal techniques are certainly the most unique (and generally the most salient) musical feature considered in this analysis, several other parameters also contribute to the construction of narrative in the *Antichrist* Triptych. First, the band uses an elaborate mixture of various styles and sources of sound. Drawing on styles outside of the rock tradition (ranging from bluesy shuffles to EDM) and freely mixing rock instruments (with and without heavy distortions), melodic synths, and noisy sound effects, Marilyn Manson sacrifices a more cohesive sound for a greater range of expressive possibilities. It has been well documented that instrumentation has extraordinary influence on the overall affect of a piece of music, but much of this type of analysis has been restricted to symphonic orchestra repertoire of the Western classical tradition.⁴⁷ Lacking a printed musical score, the process of identifying the various sounds in Marilyn Manson poses a considerable challenge in comparison to symphonic repertoire, especially given the band’s frequent use of post-production distortion and filtering. The use of acoustic or amplified rock instruments, melodic synthesizers, unpitched noise effects, or a mixture of all three served as a general system of classification.

⁴⁷ Berlioz’ *Treatise on Instrumentation* (1844) is one prominent example among many.

“The Speed of Pain” from *Mechanical Animals* uses one of the broadest palettes of instrumental sound sources of the Triptych.⁴⁸ It opens with unpitched, synthesized noise alone, but then acoustic guitar enters on top of this noise layer. The combination of atmospheric noise and melancholic guitar reflect the relationship between the narrator (named Alpha, a foil to the main protagonist, Omēga) and his environment, as the noise effects fade out when Manson begins the first verse of the song. Throughout *Mechanical Animals*, Alpha struggles to reconcile his passionate, tumultuous emotions with the cold, unfeeling world he lives in (established in the first track of the album, “Great Big White World”). This track marks the first appearance of acoustic guitar in the entire Triptych, and this unexpected appearance corresponds with the earnest emotional vulnerability in the lyrics, unprecedented in Marilyn Manson’s output:

They slit our throats
like we were flowers
and our milk has been
devoured

When you want it
it goes away too fast
When you hate it
it always seems to last
But just remember when you think
you’re free
the crack inside your fucking heart is me.

(Thought, not spoken):
I wanna outrace the speed of pain for another day

I wish I could sleep
But I can’t lay on my back
Because there’s a knife
For everyday [*sic*] that I’ve known you...

Lie to me, cry to me, give to me

⁴⁸ Marilyn Manson, “The Speed of Pain,” *Mechanical Animals*, Interscope Records INTD-90273, 1998, CD.

I would
Keep all your secrets wrapped in dead hair
I hope at least we die holding hands
for always.⁴⁹

The instrumentation of the song builds up (increasing the prominence of the gospel quartet and adding amplified guitar, drum kit, and melodic synthesizer) to a major-key breakthrough at the bridge of the song (“Lie to me...”), which features one of the only chord progressions in the entire *Triptych* that clearly establishes a major key. As opposed to the text-painting function of the accumulating intensity in “Mister Superstar,” the instrumentation in “The Speed of Pain” provides momentum towards the bridge of the song, when the narrator directly implores the subject of the song to be with him.

“The Speed of Pain” also marks Marilyn Manson’s first use of guest vocalists: a gospel quartet (John West, Lynn Davis, Nikki Harris, and Alexandra Brown) first heard in the background of the first verse then throughout the song, which again serves to highlight the track as exceptional in the *Antichrist Triptych*. A later track on *Mechanical Animals*, “User Friendly,” offers an interesting counterexample, featuring a sample of Dyanna Lauren, a pornographic actress, gasping and moaning erotically in the background of the song.⁵⁰ These starkly contrasting guest appearances offer a musical realization of Marilyn Manson’s grotesque aesthetic by juxtaposing the religious genre of gospel music and the taboo sounds of pornography, neither of which traditionally “belongs” in industrial metal music.

⁴⁹ Indentations reproduced from album booklet.

⁵⁰ Marilyn Manson, “User Friendly,” *Mechanical Animals*, Interscope Records INTD-90273, 1998, CD.

3.1.3 Tempo and Meter

Marilyn Manson also uses different tempos and meters to musically represent elements of their narratives. The three albums of the *Antichrist* Triptych vary wildly in tempo, ranging from a dirge-like 44 beats-per-minute (in the bridge of “Target Audience (Narcissus Narcosis)” from *Holy Wood*) to a feverish 260 beats-per-minute (“Burning Flag,” also from *Holy Wood*). While many of Marilyn Manson’s songs adhere to a fairly moderate rock beat, the band’s flexibility in tempo allows them to intensify their sound at key moments in their albums.

Extremely fast tempos make the narrator seem frenzied and out of control, as in “Irresponsible Hate Anthem” from *Antichrist Superstar*, the only track that doesn’t neatly fit into the chronology of the album’s narrative.⁵¹ While it is the first song on *Antichrist Superstar*, the lyrics reflect the same iconoclastic rage expressed by the protagonist in the terminal stage of his journey of transformation. This rage is expressed musically in the overall style of song, which bears similarities to the genre of thrash metal (as defined by Chad Bowar), including a “furiously fast pace with a staccato, percussive guitar sound” (188 BPM, in this case) and “aggressive... angry sounding” vocals (Manson overproduces on most of the song, and the chorus consists entirely of Manson screaming “Fuck it!”).⁵²

Extremely slow tempos, on the other hand, make for a solemn and deliberate tone, as in “Count to Six and Die (The Vacuum Of Infinite Space Encompassing)” (50 BPM), the final track of *Holy Wood*.⁵³ “Count to Six and Die” seems to be chronologically out-of-place like “Irresponsible Hate Anthem”; while it is written in the present tense, the first

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, “Irresponsible Hate Anthem,” *Antichrist Superstar*, Nothing Records INTD-90086, 1996, CD.

⁵² Chad Bowar, “What Is Thrash Metal?” *Thought Co.* (17 March 2017), accessed April 15, 2019, <https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-thrash-metal-1756180>.

⁵³ Marilyn Manson, “Count to Six and Die,” *Holy Wood*, Nothing Records: 490 790-2, 2000, CD.

and third verses describe an event that occurred in the middle of the album's narrative, the suicide of an unnamed girl:

She's got her eyes open wide
She's got the dirt and spit of the world
She's got her mouth on the metal
The lips of a scared little girl

She's got her Christian prescriptions
And death has crawled in her ear
Like elevator music of songs that
She shouldn't hear

However, the second and final verse provides context, revealing both the girl and the narrator to be dead and in an unnamed afterlife:

I've got an angel in the lobby
He's waiting to put me in line
I won't ask forgiveness
My faith has gone dry

And it spins around⁵⁴
And we all lay down
Some do it fast
And some do it better in smaller amounts

In light of this setting, "Count to Six and Die" can best be understood as a solemn dirge, "specifically associated with the time of burial and [which] often has a march-like tread, reminiscent of a funeral procession."⁵⁵ This "march-like" tread comes from single bell-like note, E3, played on a piano, which establishes the tempo and continues until the song's lengthy noise-only outro. Both the extremely slow tempo and minimalistic instrumentation distinguish "Count to Six and Die" *musically* from the rest of the album, while its setting in the afterlife distinguishes it *narratively*.

⁵⁴ "It" refers to the revolver of a pistol; a clicking sound effect heard in the background of the song was created by a .32 caliber revolver.

⁵⁵ Malcolm Boyd, "Dirge," Oxford Music Online: *Grove Music Online* (2001), accessed 15 April 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.07833>.

Deviations from Marilyn Manson's typical simple-meter groove directly correspond with ironic literary tones; the band plays rhythms with a swing feeling to give certain tracks a sarcastically playful sound. "Disposable Teens," analyzed earlier in this paper, is one example. "The Dope Show" from *Mechanical Animals* also features swing rhythms, but the song's comparatively slower tempo (90 BPM) and distinctive drum pattern clearly allude to a jazz shuffle.⁵⁶ The narrator describes what it's like to be a "star in the dope show," simultaneously reveling in their hedonism and acknowledging the emptiness of their life:

There's lots of pretty, pretty ones
that want to get you high
but all the pretty, pretty ones
will leave you low
and blow your mind

Considering all the possible genres that Marilyn Manson could have chosen to invoke, the shuffle particularly captures the rhetorical mood of the song. While associated with dance (i.e. with parties) the shuffle is a particular "step...in which the feet are moved rhythmically across the floor without being lifted."⁵⁷ Recalling Heidemann's argument for association of sound, body, and affect in musical analysis, "The Dope Show" suggests a downtrodden, apathetic mood, which suits the emotionless world of *Mechanical Animals* mentioned in my analysis of "The Speed of Pain."

⁵⁶ Marilyn Manson, "The Dope Show," *Mechanical Animals*, Interscope Records INTD-90273, 1998, CD.

⁵⁷ "Shuffle (jazz)," Oxford Music Online: *Grove Music Online* (2003), accessed April 15, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.J408700>.

3.2 Guns, God, Government: Narrative Themes in the *Antichrist* Triptych

Three particular themes receive the bulk of Marilyn Manson's criticism throughout the trilogy, most clearly summarized (though sarcastically) in "The Love Song" from *Holy Wood*:

Do you love your guns? (Yeah!)
God? (Yeah!)
And government? (Yeah!)⁵⁸

These three motives—guns, god, and government—symbolize the broader topics of violence, religion, and authoritarianism; the latter two are often conflated with or invoked in tandem with celebrity. Because these themes are ironically embraced by the band through Manson's narrative personas, his actual views will be briefly clarified using quotations from interviews. However, because his interviews are generally directed towards fans who Manson apparently expects to understand his genuine platform (either through sharing it or through an understanding of the irony in his music), he generally states his opinions on these broad topics indirectly.

While Manson consistently condemns violence itself, he generally chooses to emphasize the role played by the media in sensationalizing violence. In an open letter about Columbine published in *Rolling Stone* two months after the shooting (which Manson was widely blamed for based on erroneous reporting), Manson wrote:

A lot of people forget or never realize that I started my band as a criticism of these very issues of despair and hypocrisy. The name Marilyn Manson has never celebrated the sad fact that America puts killers on the cover of *Time* magazine, giving them as much notoriety as our favorite movie stars. From Jesse James to Charles Manson, the media, since their inception, have turned criminals into folk heroes. They just created two new ones when they plastered those dip-shits Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris' pictures on the front of every newspaper. Don't be surprised if every kid who gets pushed

⁵⁸ Marilyn Manson, "The Love Song," *Holy Wood*, Nothing Records: 490 790-2, 2000, CD.

around has two new idols...Times have not become more violent. They have just become more televised...Disgusting vultures looking for corpses, exploiting, fucking, filming, and serving it up for our hungry appetites in a gluttonous display of endless human stupidity.⁵⁹

Manson never attacks Christianity as whole, but rather the hypocrisy that some Christians tend to display, and challenges Christians to think critically about their beliefs.

In the same open letter, Manson gives one specific example:

“Get Your Gunn” [from Marilyn Manson’s first album, *Portrait of an American Family*] was a reaction to the murder of Dr. David Gunn, who was killed in Florida by pro-life activists while I was living there. That was the ultimate hypocrisy I witnessed growing up: that these people killed someone in the name of being “prolife.”⁶⁰

Bill Maher challenged Manson about some of his more controversial performances, particularly his acts of religious protest, in a 1997 episode of *Politically Incorrect*.⁶¹

Manson’s response alluded to one of his main musical goals.

MAHER: There are rumors about what you do and then there’s the reality of what you do. For example, you do rip pages out of the Bible, you do wipe your ass with the American flag. Some of these things, you have to admit, are controversial.

MANSON: Absolutely. I mean, they’re designed to make people think, but the point with the Bible or a flag is to say it’s only as valid as you make it in your heart. A piece of paper or a piece of cloth doesn’t mean anything, it’s what you believe, and I want people to think about what they believe, I want them to consider if everything...is what they believe or if that’s what they’ve been told to believe.

On the subject of authoritarianism, Manson said:

I find myself being more creative underneath a more conservative government...I think it just makes you want to be more extreme, it makes you want to push the boundaries further, just for the simple fact that

⁵⁹ Ibid., “Columbine: Whose Fault Is It?” *Rolling Stone* (24 June 1999).

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Bill Maher, *Politically Incorrect* (13 August 1997).

somebody has to fight to keep those boundaries where they are, or else they will take away a lot of our freedoms.⁶²

Overall, Marilyn Manson comes across as not *obviously* in favor of anything, but demonstrably critical of many core elements of American society, including but certainly not limited to organized religion, neoliberal government, and sensationalism of violence in the media. In fact, in the song “1996” from *Antichrist Superstar*, the narrator declares that they are “anti-” to a myriad of conflicting groups (“anti-girl” and “anti-man,” “anti-Satan” and “anti-Pope,” “anti-cop” and “anti-fun,” amongst others).⁶³ The one thing that the narrator *isn't* against is humanity itself (“Anti-people, now you’ve gone too far”). This characteristic contrarianism stems from Manson’s fundamentally subversive goals—the purpose is not to present any positivist message, but rather to establish a critical position that calls into question fundamental beliefs about life in America. When asked by Bill O’Reilly, “What’s your message? What are you trying to get across in the lyrics to these songs?” Manson replied,

It's always about being yourself and not being ashamed of being different or thinking different. I try and take everyone's ideals, common morals, flip them around, make people look at them differently, question them, so that you're not always taking things for granted.⁶⁴

In each of the *Antichrist Trilogy* albums, Manson executes variations on the same narrative: an outsider revolts against a hegemony, and ends up becoming a figurehead—a rock star—of the society they detested. The following analyses represent a combined application of the narrative analysis model developed earlier in this paper (identify subject, speaker, tone, and compare with Manson’s extra-musical values (*1.1.1 Analyzing*

⁶² Steffan Chirazi, “Marilyn Manson: Moral Minority,” *Metal Edge* (11 May 2001).

⁶³ Marilyn Manson, “1996,” *Antichrist Superstar*, Nothing Records INTD-90086, 1996, CD.

⁶⁴ *The O’Reilly Factor*, “Marilyn Manson [transcript],” interviewed by Bill O’Reilly for Fox News, 20 August 2001.

Subversive Narratives)) and a more traditional musical analysis of the parameters of vocal techniques, instrumentation, tempo and meter.

3.3 The *Antichrist* Triptych

3.3.1 Antichrist Superstar



Figure 3.3: The Worm as Depicted in the *Antichrist Superstar* Album Booklet

The first album of the trilogy, *Antichrist Superstar* (1996), is divided into three “cycles.” *Cycle I: The Hierophant* establishes the setting, a shallow, complacent plutocracy, as described in its lead single, “The Beautiful People.” Then, it introduces a character called “the Worm,” who feels rejected by and resentful of this society. In *Cycle II: Inauguration of the Worm*, the Worm successfully transforms himself into a popular and influential rock star, but becomes frustrated when his audience, rather than following his lead and rejecting their comfortable norms, begin to worship him like “the beautiful

people” he resented in the first place. Disillusioned and vengeful, the Worm finally transforms into the Antichrist in *Cycle III: Disintegrator Rising*, and resolves to destroy the world. While the Worm is the protagonist of the album, throughout all the stages of his evolution he is presented as grotesque and loathsome, through musical and rhetorical devices as well as visual imagery. However, Marilyn Manson depicts his development into the Antichrist as an inevitable consequence of the systems of celebrity.

The narrative disruption caused by “Irresponsible Hate Anthem” implies the form of a “frame story,” a literary technique associated with Gothic novels (e.g. Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*) in which one story is set within another. Clayton Tarr, a literary theorist, suggested that Gothic frames contribute to the grotesque aesthetic of the genre by tricking readers into “[facing] the horror that they have worked to reject.”⁶⁵ In this case, the origin story of the Antichrist, which constitutes the bulk of *Antichrist Superstar*, is set within a narrative in which he has already decided to destroy the world (“Let’s just kill everyone and let your God sort them out,” he sings in the second verse). However, in contrast to the final songs of the album, Marilyn Manson makes an explicit value judgement on the narrator of “Irresponsible Hate Anthem” in the title of the song. By opening *Antichrist Superstar* with a direct criticism of all-consuming hatred as “irresponsible” (even as the narrator of the song itself revels in it), Marilyn Manson clarifies from the beginning that the protagonist of the album is not meant to be admired.

As previously stated, the second track of the album, “The Beautiful People,” establishes the setting of *Antichrist Superstar*. The third and fourth tracks, “Dried Up, Tied,

⁶⁵ Clayton Carlyle Tarr, *Gothic Stories within Stories*, Jefferson NC: McFarland & Company (2017), p. 3.

and Dead To The World” and “Tourniquet,” introduce The Worm in his initial form.⁶⁶ The Worm is despondent, resentful, and simultaneously self-pitying and arrogant. In “Dried Up, Tied, and Dead To The World” he reprimands the toxic materialism introduced in “The Beautiful People,” and patronizingly asks, “Don’t you want some of this [i.e. me]? Don’t you need some of this?” Musically, this line stands out from the rest of the song: in contrast to the mid- to high-register chanting used for most of the track, Manson speaks the “Don’t you want some of this?” hook in the low vocal fry range. This contrast highlights the contradictory nature of The Worm’s pompous rhetorical questions. Despite his belief that society “needs” him, The Worm feels that he has been victimized by the world:

You take but cannot be given...pinch this tiny heart of mine, wrap it up in soiled twine...You shove your hair down my throat. I feel your fingers in me. Tear this bitter fruit to mess and wrap it in your soiled dress...All dried up and tied up forever, all fucked up and dead to the world.

Compared to “Dried Up...,” “Tourniquet” uses a more traditional rock instrumentation and emphasizes vocal melody, resulting in a more emotive quality. While the resentful and victimized tone continues through this track, the bridge of “Tourniquet” echoes the hook of “Dried Up...” with a declaration rather than a rhetorical question:

What I wanted
What I needed
What I got for me

This syntactic variation signals a shift in the Worm from self-pity to self-actualization, mirrored within the “Tourniquet” bridge itself, initially stated as an unpitched whisper then repeated as a scream. The character development across “Dried Up...” and “Tourniquet” prepares *Cycle II: Inauguration of the Worm*. This new section begins with

⁶⁶ Marilyn Manson, “Dried Up, Tied, and Dead to the World” and “Tourniquet,” *Antichrist Superstar*, Nothing Records INTD-90086, 1996, CD.

“Little Horn,” which prophecies the advent of the “Little Horn,” a Biblical allusion associated with the Antichrist.⁶⁷ The fast tempo (156 BPM) and loud, driving accompaniment of “Little Horn” make for a startlingly aggressive sound, especially following the relative sonic moderation of “Tourniquet.” Manson acts primarily as a third-party narrator in “Little Horn,” chanting the entire song in a declamatory fashion. Although the lyrics warn of the destruction that the Little Horn will inevitably bring, the narrator emphasizes the culpability of the world in its own destruction:

The world spreads its legs for another star
World shows its face for another scar...

In “Little Horn,” Marilyn Manson suggests that society opens itself to harm by providing a platform for “stars.” While the Worm does explicitly become a villain later in *Antichrist Superstar*, it is celebrity culture as a whole that receives the first blame.

The prophecy of “Little Horn” begins to unfold in “Cryptorchid” as the Worm begins his grotesque transformation:

I feel my back is changing shape...
Prick your finger, it is done
The moon has now eclipsed the sun
The angel has spread its wings
The time has come for bitter things⁶⁸

“Cryptorchid” initiates an extended metaphor (which continues throughout the rest of the album) in which “wings” represent maturation and self-actualization. In terms of both vocal techniques and instrumentation, “Cryptorchid” stands alone as an experimental outlier of the album. Manson alternates between tense, mid-register singing and glassy falsetto, which sounds unnatural amongst his usual palette of intense, extreme timbres. The

⁶⁷ Ibid., “Little Horn.”

⁶⁸ Ibid., “Cryptorchid.”

concluding refrain (“prick your finger...”) also exhibits Manson’s first use of vocoder to distort his voice, resulting in an inhuman melody far above his typical range. The unsettling timbres of Manson’s voice are accompanied at first by a throbbing collage of mostly-atonal synthesized noise, then on the refrain, by understated progressions of sustained chords and low, quiet heartbeat sound. However, the relative calm of the refrain provides only a brief, uneasy respite before unadulterated violence ensues for the rest of the album, as hatred festers in the protagonist of *Antichrist Superstar* until he lashes out in an apocalyptic fashion.

In “Deformography,” the protagonist finally becomes “a dirty, dirty rock star,” proclaiming, “I am the one you want and what you want is so unreal.”⁶⁹ In the stylistically incongruent bridge of the song (a low-quality, demo-like recording of Manson singing over acoustic guitar), the Worm finally gets his wings, in a literal sense becoming an adult insect and in a metaphorical sense gaining confidence and power:

then I got my wings and I never even knew it,
when I was a worm, thought I couldn't get through it

However, in the verses, the narrator of the song vividly documents the misery of conforming to the unreal expectations that the audience holds for the rock star:

I fell into you and I’m on my back
an insect decaying in your little trap
I squirm into you, now I’m in your gut
I fell into you, now I’m in a rut...

You eat up my heart and all the little parts
Your star is so sharp
It leaves me jagged holes
I make myself sick just to poison you
If I can’t have you then no one will

⁶⁹ Ibid., “Deformography.”

As in “Mister Superstar,” Marilyn Manson employs sounds that accumulate intensity faster each repetition in order to musically represent the narrator’s increasing unspoken frustration. These frustrations come to a lyrical foreground in “Wormboy,” as the Worm unsuccessfully attempts to convince his audience to scrutinize the norms they take for granted:

when will you realize you're already there?
so watered down-your feelings have turned to mud.
"love everybody" is destroying the value of
all hate has got me nowhere
I know I'm slipping, I know I'm slipping, I know I'm slipping away
oh no, it is everything they said it was
oh no, I am all the things they said I was
when you get to heaven you will wish you're in hell
when will you realize, you're already here
you'll thank us now that you have crossed over
don't pick the scabs or you will never heal
the world shudders as the worm gets its wings⁷⁰

Although the Worm continues to blame his problems on social expectations, he acknowledges that his own sanity is beginning to crumble under the pressures of celebrity. The narrator of “Wormboy” is musically distanced from the dark reality of this admission. The track has an upbeat tempo, a bouncy, repetitive riff, and the potential for a serious tone on the lines beginning with “Oh no...” is ruined by Manson’s use of a high-pitched, sing-song tone. However, in “Mister Superstar” (analyzed in *3.1.1 Vocal Timbres*), the Worm can no longer dismiss his growing hatred for humanity, as the attention he receives from the public has become sinister and dangerous:

I wanna see you kill yourself on T.V.
I wish you'd kill yourself on T.V.
Will you kill yourself on T.V.?
We'd like to see you dead
(I wish I was dead)

⁷⁰ Ibid., “Wormboy.”

Hey, Mister Superstar,
I'd kill myself for you
Hey, Mister Superstar,
I'll kill you if I can't have you⁷¹

“Angel With The Scabbed Wings” further develops the toxic relationship between the Worm and the public.⁷² The song is written from a third-person perspective and disparages both the Worm (i.e. the Angel With The Scabbed Wings) and his audience:

He is the Angel with the scabbed wings
Hard-drug face, want to powder his nose
He will deflower the freshest crop
Dry up all the wombs with his rock and roll sores

Dead is what he is, he does what he please
The things that he has you'll never want to see
What you're never gonna be now
Sketch a little keyhole for looking-glass people
You don't want to see him, you only want to be him
Mommy's got a scarecrow, gotta let the corn grow
Man can't always reap what he sow

He is the maker
He is the taker
He is the savior
He is the raper

“Angel With The Scabbed Wings” uses the inconsistent vocal style described in the analysis of “Disposable Teens,” which here gives the narrator a feverish, unrestrained sound, especially in the breathless screams heard in the “Sketch a little keyhole...” verse. The frenzied style of the singing against the driving, militaristic accompaniment of the track suggests that “Angel With The Scabbed Wings” functions as a desperate warning about the dangers of worshipping this particular rock star. The narrator of the song directly

⁷¹ Ibid., “Mister Superstar.”

⁷² Ibid., “Angel With The Scabbed Wings.”

issues a caution for the obsessed fans of the Worm, suggesting that if they don't abandon him now, then they will eventually be consumed ("dried up"):

Get back you're never gonna leave him
Get back you're always gonna please him

In "Kinderfeld," the Worm apparently experiences a psychotic break, hearing voices in his head that control him.⁷³ "Kinderfeld" is the only explicitly dramaturgical song in the *Antichrist Superstar* narrative; its lyrics in the album booklet identify five separate speakers, in the style of a theatrical script: the Worm, Jack (Manson's own grandfather), "a voice we have not yet heard," a boy, and the Disintegrator.

he lives inside my mouth
and tells me what to say
when he turns the trains
 on he makes it go away
 the hands are cracked and dirty and
 the nails are beetle wings
when he turns the trains on he
unties all of the strings
the worm: "tell me something beautiful,
 tell me something free,
 tell me something beautiful
 and I wish that I could be."
(then I got my wings and I never even knew it,
when I was a worm, thought I couldn't get through it)
 jack: (not spoken) come, come
the toys all smell like children
and scab-knees will obey
i'll have to kneel on broomsticks
just to make it go away.
 [the inauguration of the worm]
(then I got my wings and I never even knew it,
when I was a worm, thought I couldn't get through it)
a voice we have not yet heard: "because today
is black/because there is no turning back.
because your lies have watered me/I have become the
strongest weed"
 through jack's eyes:
the taste of metal

⁷³ Ibid., "Kinderfeld."

disintegrator
 three holes upon the leather belt
 it's cut and swollen
 and the age is showing
boy: "There's no one here to save ourself." [*sic*]
the disintegrator: (to himself)
this is what you should fear
you are what you should fear⁷⁴

In “Kinderfeld,” Manson uses the most grotesque vocal distortions of the Triptych, including the unsettling falsetto first heard in “Cryptorchid,” low, throaty growls, drawling vocal fry (with long, drawn-out syllables), extremely strained production, intense whispers, and a heavy-handed use of electronic filters. At 55 beats-per-minute, it is also the slowest song of the album; the extreme tempo contributes to the mood of menacing gloom. Finally, the Worm reaches his final stage of transformation; Manson reprises the bridge of “Wormboy” in a warbling, filtered voice. The line sung by the “boy” recalls the ominous ending of “Angel With The Scabbed Wings,” revealing that the public didn’t heed the warning of the “Angel...” narrator and have passed the point of redemption. Finally, the Antichrist emerges, as the Worm is overtaken by the “voice we have not yet heard,” revealed to be the apocalyptic Disintegrator, who chants at the end of the song, “this is what you should fear; you [the Worm, the Antichrist, the Disintegrator] are what you should fear.”

The Antichrist makes his public debut in “Antichrist Superstar.”⁷⁵ The song opens with the Antichrist accusing the public of creating him with their materialism and complacency:

You built me up with your wishing hell
I didn’t have to sell you
You threw your money in the pissing well

⁷⁴ Indentations reproduced from album booklet.

⁷⁵ Ibid., “Antichrist Superstar.”

You do just what they tell you

In the chorus, the narrator introduces himself as “the Hydra” who has “shed [his] skin to feed the fake,” demands that his audience “repent” for causing this final, terminal transformation, and taunts them, implying that they’ll get what he believes they deserve (“now you’ll see your star”). The chorus also alludes to an overarching thematic query of the *Triptych*—who is to blame for evil in the world (“Whose mistake am I anyway?”)? The accompaniment quotes the call-and-response percussion of Queen’s “We Will Rock You,” but uses blaring power chords and a sample of a crowd shouting “Hey!” instead of stomping and clapping. This implication of an enthusiastic audience suggests that despite the Antichrist’s transparently malicious intentions, he has maintained his celebrity status.

In “1996,” the Antichrist describes his agenda.⁷⁶ A contradictory list of groups and institutions opposed by the narrator constitutes most of the song’s lyrics (see [3.2 Guns, God, Government](#)). The extremely fast tempo of the song (168 BPM) and Manson’s overproduced, unpitched vocals support the unhinged tone of the tirade. The all-encompassing range of the narrator’s hatred is established by a spoken line at the beginning of the track: “Light a candle for the sinners, and set the world on fire,” with the obvious implication that every person on Earth is a sinner, and they all deserve to burn. The song’s refrain suggests that the particular offense that has triggered the Antichrist to force the entire world’s retribution was dehumanization: “Anti-people, now you’ve gone too far—here’s your Antichrist Superstar.” “1996” ends with an acknowledgement of the irony of the Antichrist’s platform of universal hatred: “Anti-song and anti-me, I don’t deserve a

⁷⁶ Ibid., “1996.”

chance to be.” In taking the punishment of the world’s population into his own hands, he, too, becomes “anti-people” and deserves to die along with his victims.

In “Minute of Decay,” the Antichrist reflects on the impending damnation he is preparing to inflict on himself and the world.⁷⁷ Its moderate tempo (90 BPM), subtle accompaniment (consisting of a simple drum beat, an understated bass guitar riff, and interspersed distorted embellishments), and soft vocals vividly contrast the frenzied style of “1996,” and its first lyrics offer an unexpected moment of emotional vulnerability.

There’s not much left to love
Too tired today to hate
I feel the empty
I feel the minute of decay

I’m on my way down, now
I’d like to take you with me
I’m on my way down

In the chorus, the narrator laments the inevitability of the Worm’s corruption and expresses a desire to escape his doomed path and acquiesce to the superficial demands of society.

The minute that it’s born
it begins to die
I’d love to just give in,
I’d love to live this lie

This lapse in conviction is accompanied by an interruption of the bass riff by a simpler, but much more distorted and noisy, riff. Manson sings over the reverberation of the riff, rather than along with the riff itself, resulting in greater intensity. The alternation between guitar and voice also mimics a call-and-response, creating tension and conflict before the original bass riff resumes as before.

⁷⁷ Ibid., “Minute of Decay.”

The feelings of hesitation expressed in “Minute of Decay” are jarringly abandoned in “The Reflecting God,” which begins with the *a capella* declaration, “Your world is an ashtray.”⁷⁸ The narrator addresses the public with transparent contempt:

Your world is an ashtray
We burn and coil like cigarettes
The more you cry your ashes turn to mud
It's the nature of the leeches
the virgin's feeling cheated
You've only spent a second of your life

My world is unaffected there is an exit here
I say it is and then it's true
There is a dream inside a dream
I'm wide awake the more I sleep
You'll understand when I'm dead

I went to God just to see, and I was looking at me
Saw heaven and hell were lies
When I'm God everybody dies
Scar, can you feel my power?
Shoot here and the world gets smaller
Scar, scar, can you feel my power?
One shot and the world gets smaller

Let's jump upon the sharp swords
And cut away our smiles
Without the threat of death
There's no reason to live at all
My world is unaffected, there is an exit here
I say it is and then it's true,
There is a dream inside a dream,
I'm wide awake the more I sleep
You'll understand when I'm dead

Shoot, shoot, shoot, motherfucker

Each thing I show you is a piece of my death
No salvation, no forgiveness
This is beyond your experience

⁷⁸ Ibid., “The Reflecting God.”

The delayed entrance of the instrumentals in “The Reflecting God” inverts the relationship between Manson’s vocals and the accompaniment; whereas the voice typically assumes a passive role, driven along by the guitars and drums, the voice *initiates* “The Reflecting God,” then the guitar and drums take over the momentum. This unique moment is a fitting setting for the narrative climax, which fans have widely interpreted as the Antichrist destroying the world.⁷⁹

The title refers to the pre-chorus (“I went to God just to see...”), and neatly aligns with Sartre’s definition of the grotesque as a reflection of the horrors of the world. The Antichrist is able to see himself in God because he has been given the same reverence and holds the same universal power (“I say it is, then it’s true”) but instead chooses to use this status to destroy instead of to create (“When I’m God, everyone dies”). “The Reflecting God” implies that ultimately, humanity destroys *itself* at the command of the Antichrist (“Shoot, motherfucker”). The shared culpability insinuated by “The Reflecting God” corresponds with the overarching message of *Antichrist Superstar*: America’s obsession with celebrity and power enables and perpetuates violence and destruction.

“Man That You Fear,” the final song of *Antichrist Superstar*, summarizes the entire narrative of the album.⁸⁰ Its affect is melancholic and tragic; in fact, the title of a later acoustic remix of the track refers to “Man That You Fear” as a “requiem for *Antichrist Superstar*.”⁸¹ In it, the protagonist ruminates on the events of the album and analyzes the factors that contributed to his actions. While he still refuses to accept responsibility,

⁷⁹ “Antichrist Superstar (album),” *The Marilyn Manson Encyclopedia*, accessed April 22, 2019, [http://www.mansonwiki.com/wiki/Antichrist_Superstar_\(album\)](http://www.mansonwiki.com/wiki/Antichrist_Superstar_(album)).

⁸⁰ Marilyn Manson, “Man That You Fear,” *Antichrist Superstar*, Nothing Records INTD-90086, 1996, CD.

⁸¹ Marilyn Manson, “Man That You Fear (Acoustic Requiem For Antichrist Superstar),” *Remix & Repent*, Interscope Records INTDM - 95017, 1997, CD.

Marilyn Manson's goal for the album was never to blame the Antichrist, but to force a confrontation with the systems that created and enabled him.

the ants are in the sugar
the muscles atrophied
we're on the other side, the screen is us and
we're t.v.
spread me open, sticking to my pointy ribs are
all your infants in abortion cribs
I was born into this
everything turns to shit
the boy that you loved is the
man that you fear
pray until you're number, asleep from all
your pain, your apple has been rotting
tomorrow's turned up dead
i have it all and i have no choice but to
i'll make everyone pay and you will see
you can kill yourself now
because you're dead
in my mind
the boy that you loved is the
monster you fear
peel off all those eyes and crawl into the
dark, you've poisoned all of your children
to camouflage your scars
pray unto the splinters, pray unto your fear
pray your life was just a dream
the cut that never heals
pray now baby, pray your life was just a dream
(I am so tangled in my sins that I cannot escape)
pinch the head off, collapse me like a weed
someone had to go this far
the world in my hands, there's no one left to
hear you scream
there's no one left for you

3.3.2 *Mechanical Animals*

Marilyn Manson reinvented themselves with the 1998 release of *Mechanical Animals*, the second installation in the *Antichrist Triptych*. The album has a much more radio-friendly sound than *Antichrist Superstar*, and fans even accused the band of selling

out. “Of the 14 tracks here, ten could be singles,” wrote one critic. “On this evidence alone, *Mechanical Animals* is an unashamedly crass bid for total world domination.”⁸² The radio-friendly quality of the album partially stems from the heavy influence of glam rock on the album; in fact, the use of an alien as the main character seems to be a direct reference to David Bowie’s “Ziggy Stardust” persona. The result of this influence is an overall *lighter* album in comparison to the heavy-metal dominated *Antichrist Superstar*.

Manson explained the early concept of the album on MTV News:

If 'Antichrist Superstar' was sort of my comparative fall from grace, Lucifer being kicked from heaven, this next record is about what happens on Earth now, (It's about) sort of trying to fit into a society that thinks it's full of emotions and that you're a callous person, when in fact you're the one that actually has all these feelings and it's the world that's kind of numb to them. It's almost the antithesis of what I just did.⁸³

He elaborates, in a 1998 interview with Paul Elliott for *Kerrang!*:

I just wanted to approach this album from a different point of view. I'd assumed the role of destroyer on the last record. This role is more a savior. I wanted to write songs that were more personal and dealt with specific emotions. The music had to really compliment that, but there wasn't a conscious effort to make more accessible songs. There was simply an effort to write songs that would make people feel differently to the songs on the last album. In a sense that makes it more accessible, but it's not just for the sake of pop. Even if it was, that's okay too. I can appreciate the Spice Girls and Garth Brooks in the Andy Warhol sense of it - pop art.⁸⁴

The “rock star” persona in *Mechanical Animals* is Omēga, an androgynous alien who is kidnapped in Hollywood and becomes the frontman of a popular glam rock band. Although the album is less chronological than *Antichrist Superstar*, it begins with Omēga at the height of their fame. Omēga lives a hedonistic life, abuses drugs and sex, and

⁸² Kitty Empire, “Marilyn Manson: Mechanical Animals,” IPC Media: *NME* (1998).

⁸³ MTV News Staff, “Marilyn Manson Discusses New Concept For Next Album,” *MTV News* (3 December 1997).

⁸⁴ Paul Elliott, “The Man Who Fell To Earth,” Provider Module Media Archive: *Kerrang!* (19 September 1998).

expresses a nihilistic philosophical outlook much like the one at which the *Antichrist* eventually arrives. Half of the songs come from the perspective of a second character, Alpha, who acts as a foil to Omēga by expressing his struggles to cope with volatile emotions in a seemingly emotionless world.

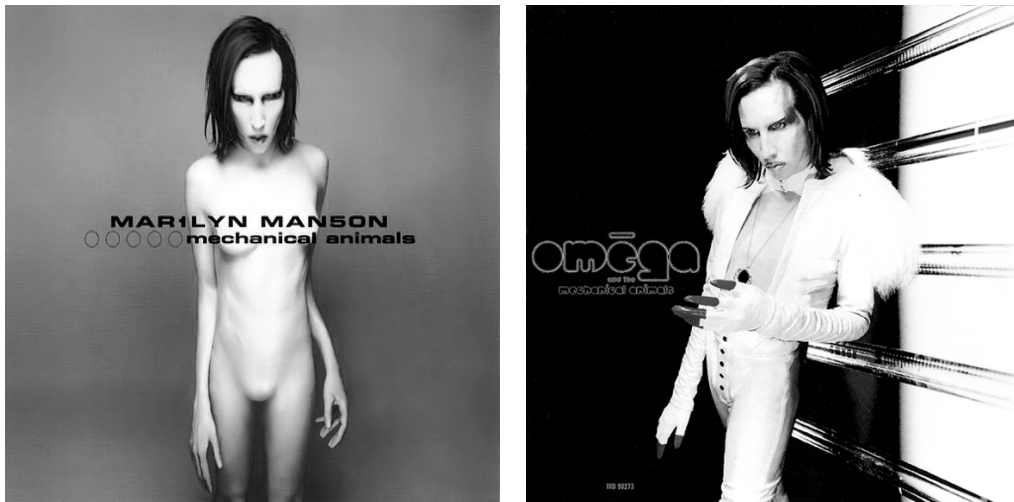


Figure 3.4: *Mechanical Animals* dual album covers

Over the course of the album, both main characters fall in love with “Coma White,” who is at various points said to be a beautiful girl, a drug, or just a hallucination. Coma White represents unattainable perfection, and by the end of the album, Omēga is heartbroken by their inability to prove their value to Coma. Consequently, *Mechanical Animals* presents the opposite narrative of the other two albums in the Triptych; Omēga, although an “outsider” in a literal sense, *starts* as a figurehead but eventually realizes that celebrity can be destructive. Meanwhile, Alpha knows from the start that the values of popular culture are superficial and spends the duration of the album trying unsuccessfully to reconcile this knowledge with intense, painful emotions resulting from a terrible loss. In this way, as Omēga begins to feel heartbroken, he approaches the perspective held by Alpha all along. The tracks of the album are divided into the dual perspectives of Alpha

and Omēga implicitly by narrative indicators in the tracks themselves and explicitly by the two-part album booklet.

While the album is not explicitly divided (as with the “cycles” of *Antichrist Superstar*), my analysis has identified four main sections. The first acts as an exposition; the tracks alternate between the perspectives of Alpha and Omēga, establishing the conditions of both characters. The album begins from Alpha’s perspective with “Great Big White World,” which describes the setting of the album from his perspective:

It’s a great big white world,
and we are drained of our colors
We used to love ourselves,
We used to love one another
All my stitches itch
My prescription’s low,
I wish you were queen
Just for today
In a world so white, what else could I say?⁸⁵

Alpha longs for a time in the past when love still existed, implying that he believes that the present world in *Mechanical Animals* is loveless. He also insinuates that his particular loss was of Coma White, both in the form of a drug (“my prescription’s low”) and a woman (“I wish you were queen”). The use of both atmospheric electronics and traditional rock instruments reflect the disconnect between Alpha and the “white world.”

The second song from Alpha’s perspective, “Mechanical Animals” (track 3), further develops his nostalgia and longing, using a similar instrumentation to “Great Big White World.”⁸⁶ However, Alpha now concedes that the relationship he mourned in the first song wasn’t viable (“I am never gonna be the one for you”) and that his former lover

⁸⁵ Marilyn Manson, “Great Big White World,” *Mechanical Animals*, Interscope Records INTD-90273, 1998, CD.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, “Mechanical Animals.”

is an apparently unstoppable destructive force (“I am never gonna save the world from you”), but also warns her that her admirers will “never be good to you, or bad you. They’ll never be anything at all.” “Great Big White World” also has an autobiographical element; the line “I was a hand grenade that never stopped exploding,” an allusion to a statement from a father who blamed his son’s suicide on Marilyn Manson and called *Antichrist Superstar* “a hand grenade.”⁸⁷

Omēga establishes the setting of the album from their perspective in “The Dope Show” (track 2).⁸⁸ “The Dope Show” is in the style of a shuffle, which suggests an undercurrent of dejection in the song (3.1.3 *Tempo and Meter*). However, its bluesy main riff, unexpected noise effects, and lazy style of singing (Manson sings breathily, slightly behind the beat, and slides between pitches) given it a nonchalant and even indulgent tone. “The Dope Show” also reveals Omēga to be a drug abuser, “narcissistic and so shallow,” and sexually promiscuous (“Who will I wake up with tomorrow?”).

In Omēga’s second song, “Rock Is Dead” (track 4), the narrator complains about moral crusades on rock music and argues that rock is simply an outward expression of the hedonism that permeates society:

Rock is deader than dead
Shock is all in your head
Your sex and your dope is all that we’re fed
So fuck all your protests
and put them to bed
(God is in the T.V.)

1,000 mothers are praying for it
We’re so full of hope
And so full of shit

⁸⁷ Chris Nelson, “Senate Hearing Attempts To Connect Manson To Suicide,” *MTV News* (7 November 1997), accessed 19 April 2019, <http://www.mtv.com/news/1775/senate-hearing-attempts-to-connect-manson-to-suicide/>.

⁸⁸ Marilyn Manson, “The Dope Show,” *Mechanical Animals*, Interscope Records INTD-90273, 1998, CD.

Build a new god
To medicate and to ape
Sell us ersatz
Dressed up and real fake
(Anything to belong)⁸⁹

“Rock Is Dead” reveals that Omēga, too, resents the superficiality of society, but chooses to revel in it, whereas Alpha feels like he has been victimized. Like “Mechanical Animals,” this song also is tinted with autobiographical elements; Marilyn Manson is often classified as a “shock-rock” band in reaction to their grotesque aesthetic, and Christian conservatives led protests at nearly every stop of the *Antichrist Superstar* tour.⁹⁰

The next two sections of *Mechanical Animals* are distinguished by two sets of songs, the first from Alpha’s perspective and the second from Omēga’s, and provide the narrative arc of the album. The first set (tracks 5-7), comes from Alpha’s perspective. While Omēga is an alien in a literal sense, Alpha *feels* alien, as he expresses in “Disassociative”:

I can tell you what they say in space:
that our earth is too grey
but when the spirit is to digital
the body acts this way
That world was killing me
Disassociative
(The nervous system’s down)

I can never get out of here
I don’t want to just float in fear
A dead astronaut in space⁹¹

⁸⁹ Ibid., “Rock Is Dead.”

⁹⁰ Matthew Mirapaul, “The Traveling Controversy That Is Marilyn Manson,” *The New York Times: Cybertimes* (24 April 1997), accessed November 9, 2018, <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/library/cyber/mirapaul/042497mirapaul.html>.

⁹¹ Marilyn Manson, “Disassociative,” *Mechanical Animals*, Interscope Records INTD-90273, 1998, CD.

Besides the obvious references in the lyrics of the song, the style of “Disassociative” stylistically recalls David Bowie’s “Space Oddity.” Both tracks use a near-identical drum fill leading into a noisy transition to the climax of the song (“This is Ground Control to Major Tom... It’s time to leave the capsule if you dare” and “I can never get out of here...”). “Disassociative” shows that the roles played by Alpha and Omēga are not as disparate as they seemed, juxtaposed in the introduction section of *Mechanical Animals*. Furthermore, “Disassociative” initiates an emotional transformation in Alpha that Omēga will later undergo in reverse.

In the second song of the set, a subversion of the typically sentimental rock ballad, Alpha expresses a desire to “outrage the speed of pain” caused by his traumatic relationship (see 3.1.2 *Instrumentation*).⁹² He actualizes this desire in “Posthuman,” which formally introduces the figure of Coma White as Alpha becomes obsessed with her.⁹³ From the beginning, Coma White is as insidious as she is appealing:

She’s got eyes like Zapruder⁹⁴
And a mouth like heroin
She wants me to be perfect like Kennedy...
Say, “Show me the dead stars,
all of them sing.”
This is a riot, religious and clean

She’s pilgrim and pagan
Softworn and social
In all of her dreams
She’s a saint like Jackie-O

[Coma White:] “All that glitters is cold.”⁹⁵

⁹² Ibid., “The Speed Of Pain.”

⁹³ Ibid., “Posthuman.”

⁹⁴ The Zapruder film is the most complete recording of the assassination of John F. Kennedy.

⁹⁵ Rose McGowan, Manson’s girlfriend at the time, provided the voice of Coma White.

In contrast to characteristically slow tempo and balance of electronics and rock instruments in the previous songs from Alpha's perspective, "Posthuman" is extremely fast (154 BPM) and dominated by rock instruments, signifying Alpha's acclimatization to the ideals of Coma White and the setting as a whole.

The album returns to Omēga's perspective, announced by a robotic voice at the end of "Posthuman" introducing Omēga as the frontman of a fictional glam rock band: "Ladies and gentlemen...Omēga and the Mechanical Animals!" The first four songs of the Omēga cycle are all upbeat and radio-friendly, but their lyrics are bitterly sarcastic about the narrator's own lifestyle. Omēga explains their post-nihilist attitude in "I Want To Disappear":

Look at me now
Got no religion
Look at me now
I'm so vacant
Look at me now
I was a virgin
Look at me now
Grew up to be a whore

I wanna die young
And sell my soul
Use up all your drugs
And make me come
Yesterday man,
I was a nihilist and
Now today I'm
Just too fucking bored
By the time I'm old enough
I won't know anything at all

Hey, and our mommies are lost now
Hey, daddy's someone else
Hey, we love the abuse
because it makes us feel like we are needed

But I know I wanna disappear, baby⁹⁶

The sing-songy refrain, “look at me now,” drips with self-deprecation as Omēga describes how empty their life has become. The incongruence between the playful connotations of certain lyrics (“Hey,” “mommies/daddies,” “baby”) and the disturbing sentiment of others (“we love the abuse because it makes us feel like we are needed”) becomes a trend of the Omēga cycle.

In “I Don’t Like The Drugs (But The Drugs Like Me),” Omēga addresses their drug abuse with a tone of mock innocence (“norm life, baby,” they repeat ad nauseam).⁹⁷ The song features the same gospel quartet as “The Speed of Pain,” supporting the song’s funky style. However, as in “I Want To Disappear,” the light-hearted tone of the song’s surface belies a grim message:

You and I are underdosed and we’re ready to fall
Raised to be stupid, taught to be nothing at all

I’m just a sample of a soul
Made to look just like a human being

There’s a hole in our soul that we fill with dope
And we’re feeling fine

Thus, in contrast to Alpha’s initial wallowing, Omēga ignores the same feelings of emptiness by covering them up with distractions. Omēga’s bitter attitude escalates in “New Model No. 15” as they disparage their own shallow identity (“I’m as fake as a wedding cake...pitifully predictable, correctly political”) and superficial relationships:

Lifelike and poseable
Hopeless and disposable
I’m the new, new model
I’ve got nothing inside

⁹⁶ Marilyn Manson, “I Want To Disappear,” *Mechanical Animals*, Interscope Records INTD-90273, 1998, CD.

⁹⁷ Ibid., “I Don’t Like The Drugs (But The Drugs Like Me).”

Better in the head and in bed at the office
I can suck it and smile

Don't let them know how far you go,
or that you use your "lovers"
Oh look, you're like a VCR
Stick something in to know
just who you are⁹⁸

In "User Friendly," Omēga's self-loathing and related self-destructive habits continue to accumulate.⁹⁹ The sing-songy background vocals and a sample of a porn star moaning explicitly give the song a frivolous, juvenile quality. However, the slower tempo and dragging, overproduced vocals suggest that Omēga is approaching a breaking point; the lyrics confirm this, as Omēga expresses suicidal thoughts in the first verse:

Use me when you want to come
I've bled just to have your touch
When I'm in you I want to die

Use me like I was a whore
Relationships are such a bore
Delete the ones that you've fucked

User friendly fucking dopestar obscene
Will you die when you're high
You'd never die just for me
She says,
"I'm not in love, but I'm gonna fuck you
'Til somebody better comes along."

Indeed, Omēga *does* reach a breaking point in "Fundamentally Loathsome."¹⁰⁰ At 57 beats-per-minute, it is by far the slowest track on the album, creating an exaggerated version of the melancholic shuffle heard in Omēga's first song, "The Dope Show." However, whereas Marilyn Manson hid the melancholy of "The Dope Show" under a

⁹⁸ Ibid., "New Model No. 15."

⁹⁹ Ibid., "User Friendly."

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., "Fundamentally Loathsome."

generous layer of sarcasm, Omēga lays their heartbreak bare in “Fundamentally Loathsome.”

And I want to wake up in your white, white sun
And I want to wake up in your world with no pain
But I'll just suffer in a hope to die someday
While you are numb all of the way

When I hate it, I know I can feel, but
When you love it you know it's not real

And I am resigned to this wicked fucking world
On its way to hell
The living are dead and
I hope to join them too
I know what to do and I do it well

I'd shoot myself to love you
If I loved myself I'd be shooting you

An understated drum beat and an uncomplicated duet between bass guitar and piano make up the main accompaniment of the song, joined in some sections by synthesized additions. An extended guitar solo leads to the outro, a sudden imposition of the traditional heavy metal sound on the otherwise minimally-orchestrated track, as Manson summarizes Omēga's unresolved conflict between their own well-being and the desire to be accepted: “I'd shoot myself to love you; if I loved myself I'd be shooting you.”

Mechanical Animals returns to Alpha's perspective in its last two tracks, once again using moderate tempos and a balance of electronics and rock instruments. In “The Last Day On Earth,” Alpha describes the signs of an impending apocalypse and presents conflicting details regarding the status of his relationship with Coma White.¹⁰¹ At first, he sings, “Now I found you,” but then, “I'm so empty here without you.” In the chorus, he declares, “We'll be together while the planet dies.” These contradictory statements seem

¹⁰¹ Ibid., “The Last Day On Earth.”

to imply that Alpha has lapsed into psychosis, and that his vision of Coma is merely a hallucination. However, she reappears unambiguously in the final track of the album, “Coma White,” when Alpha witnesses her suicide.

There's something cold and blank behind her smile
She's standing on an overpass
In her miracle mile
(Coma):
"You were from a perfect world
A world that threw me away today
Today to run away"

A pill to make you numb
A pill to make you dumb
A pill to make you anybody else
But all the drugs in this world
Won't save her from herself

Her mouth was an empty cut
And she was waiting to fall
Just bleeding like a polaroid that
Lost all her dolls

The opposite narratives of Alpha and Omēga problematize celebrity from both an outside and inside perspective. Alpha becomes enchanted by the hedonism he once despised, showing the seductive powers of fame and superficiality, but ultimately witnesses the demise of the world and the suicide of Coma White (i.e. unfeeling perfection). Omēga’s journey starts at the peak of their fame, but they find that their shallow lifestyle is unsustainable and end up heartbroken.

3.3.3 *Holy Wood (In The Shadow Of The Valley Of Death)*

Holy Wood (In The Shadow Of The Valley Of Death) concludes the *Antichrist* Triptych. The main setting, “Holy Wood,” is a parody of Los Angeles where citizens worship dead celebrities (including John Lennon, John F. Kennedy, and, of course, Jesus

Christ) in a cult called “Celebritarianism.” The “Valley of Death” acts as a secondary, symbolic setting, representing outcasts, decay, and ultimately death itself.

In part, *Holy Wood* constitutes Manson’s response to the Columbine High School shooting in Littleton, Colorado, as well as the numerous reports that blamed Marilyn Manson for inciting the shooters to violence (later shown to be erroneous). *Holy Wood* never directly references the Columbine tragedy, but the album’s narrative follows Adam Kadmon, a neglected outsider who rises out of “the shadow of the valley of death” to incite a violent revolution against Holy Wood but ultimately fails in his quest to change society, as he ironically becomes a celebrated martyr.

Through the story of Adam, Holy Wood, and Celebritarianism, Marilyn Manson holds celebrity, media, and society as a whole accountable for tragedies like Columbine.

In an interview with Christopher Scapelliti in *Revolver*, he said:

Violence is the album’s main subject matter. I’m just looking at the problem of violence in America and saying, if you want to find something to blame, it’s all of us.¹⁰²

In “Columbine: Whose Fault Is It?”, Manson elaborated on this position:

When it comes down to who’s to blame for the high school murders in Littleton, Colorado, throw a rock and you’ll hit someone who’s guilty. We’re the people who sit back and tolerate children owning guns, and we’re the ones who tune in and watch the up-to-the-minute details of what they do with them. I think it’s terrible when anyone dies, especially if it is someone you know and love. But what is more offensive is that when these tragedies happen, most people don’t really care any more than they would about the season finale of *Friends* or *The Real World*. I was dumbfounded as I watched the media snake right in, not missing a teardrop, interviewing the parents of dead children, televising the funerals. Then came the witch hunt. Man’s greatest fear is chaos. It was unthinkable that these kids did not have a simple black-and-white reason for their actions. And so a scapegoat was needed... Since Middle America has not heard of the music they did

¹⁰² Christopher Scapelliti, “Dark Angel [Interview with Marilyn Manson],” *Revolver* (Winter 2000), p. 75.

listen to (KMFDM and Rammstein, among others), the media picked something they thought was similar.¹⁰³

Marilyn Manson addresses all of these points in *Holy Wood*: children committing violent crimes (“Disposable Teens”), the pain of losing someone you love (“Coma Black”), insensitive coverage of tragedies (“The Nobodies”), and scapegoating (“Target Audience”). However, these themes are subsidiary to the main object of criticism in *Holy Wood*: “media martyrs.” Manson summarized this in the interview on *The O’Reilly Factor*:

If you die and enough people are watching, then you become a martyr, you become a hero, you become well-known. So when you have things like Columbine and you have these kids that are angry and they have something to say and no one's listening, the media sends a message that if you do something loud enough and it gets our attention, then you will be famous for it. Those kids ended up on the cover of "Time" magazine. The media gave them exactly what they wanted. And that's why I never did any interviews when that happened, when I was getting blamed for it, because I felt that I would be contributing to what I found to be reprehensible.¹⁰⁴

As with *Antichrist Superstar*, Marilyn Manson divides the track listing of *Holy Wood* into cycles: “In the Shadow,” “The Androgyne,” “Of Red Earth,” and “The Fallen.” Each cycle is also labelled with an initial, spelling out the name ADAM. Compared with the first two albums of the Triptych, the narrative exposition of *Holy Wood* is exceptionally prolonged: the establishment of setting and Adam’s motivations constitute almost half of the album. The actual revolution occurs in the third cycle, and the aftermath settles in “The Fallen.” The disproportionate form of *Holy Wood* allows for an in-depth exploration of the causes and consequences of violence.

¹⁰³ Marilyn Manson, “Columbine: Whose Fault Is It?” *Rolling Stone* (24 June 1999).

¹⁰⁴ *The O’Reilly Factor*, “Marilyn Manson [transcript],” interviewed by Bill O’Reilly for Fox News, 20 August 2001.

The album begins with “Godeatgod,” an ominous song in the form of a letter to God.¹⁰⁵ The title implies that the narrator believes himself to be a god, as well; the chorus’s suggestion that the narrator created life—or, at least, an imitation of it (the “dolls that I made”)—supports this reading. Furthermore, a later song on the album (“Cruci-Fiction in Space”) transforms the distinctive description of the crucifixion in “Godeatgod” (“Dear God, do you want to tear your knuckles down?”) into first-person perspective (“I am a revolution, pull my knuckles down if I could”). Like “Irresponsible Hate Anthem” in *Antichrist Superstar*, “Godeatgod” functions as a frame narrative for *Holy Wood*; its narrator corresponds with Adam at the end of the album, looking back on the destruction that he caused and despising his sycophantic followers:

Before the bullets
Before the flies
Before authorities take out my eyes
The only smiling are you dolls that I made
But you are plastic and so are your brains

“The Love Song” alternates between the perspectives of Adam and “The Father,” the fervently religious, war-mongering, demagogic leader of Holy Wood.¹⁰⁶ Manson’s use of mid-register melodic singing in the verses and high-register screaming in the chorus differentiate the two narrators of the song; the album booklet, where the lyrics are written in the style of a theatrical script, confirms that the verses are sung by “the bullet” and the choruses by “The Father.” The former is an epithet for Adam which appears again in “The Death Song” (“We’re on a bullet and we’re headed straight into God”). The feverish voice of The Father stirring up an audience (“Do you love your guns?” (YEAH!) “God?”

¹⁰⁵ Marilyn Manson, “Godeatgod,” *Holy Wood (In The Shadow Of The Valley Of Death)*. Nothing Records: 490 790-2, 2000, CD.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, “The Love Song.”

(YEAH!) “The government?” (YEAH!)) stands as an antithesis to the innocent and idealistic ruminations of “The Bullet” about his infatuation with “a pretty pistol” in the first verse of the song.

I’ve got a crush on a pretty pistol,
should I tell her that I feel this way?
Father told us to be faithful.

However, the Bullet’s second verse foreshadows his rise to power as a revolutionary leader:

She tells me I’m a pretty bullet
I’m gonna be a star someday
Mother says that we should look away
She tells me I’m a pretty bullet,
an Imitation Christ
I’ve got love songs in my head
that are killing us away

The following track, “The Fight Song,” makes a dramatic leap in the character development of Adam, accompanied by a near-doubling of tempo (70 to 130 BPM).¹⁰⁷ Whereas Adam seemed optimistic (“I’m gonna be a star someday”) and obedient (“Father told us... Mother says...”) in “The Love Song,” he is dramatically disillusioned and rebellious in “The Fight Song”:

Nothing suffocates you more than
the passing of everyday human events
Isolation is the oxygen mask you make
your children breathe into [*sic*] survive

But I'm not a slave to a god
that doesn't exist
I'm not a slave to a world
that doesn't give a shit

And when we were good
you just closed your eyes
So when we are bad

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., “The Fight Song.”

we'll scar your minds

Fight! Fight! Fight! Fight!

You'll never grow up to be a big-rock-star-celebrated-victim-of-your-fame
They'll just cut our wrists like
cheap coupons and say that death
was on sale today

The death of one is a tragedy
but the death of millions is just a statistic

In “Disposable Teens,” Adam elaborates on his new, rebellious identity (see 3.1.1 *Vocal Timbres*).¹⁰⁸ The song’s playful beat supports the narrator’s rhetorical strategy of ironic frivolity as a means of undermining the dismissal of youth. “Target Audience (Narcissus Narcosis)” retains the sarcasm of “Disposable Teens,” but takes a serious, bitter tone.¹⁰⁹ A series of sardonic apologies in the song’s two verses question the validity of scapegoating:

Am I sorry your sky went black,
put your knives in babies backs? [*sic*]
Am I sorry you killed the Kennedy's, and Huxley too?¹¹⁰
But I'm sorry Shakespeare
was your scapegoat
and your apple's sticking into my throat
Sorry your Sunday smiles are rusty nails
and your crucifixion commercials failed

Am I sorry just to be alive,
putting my face in the beehive?
Am I sorry for Booth and Oswald, pinks and cocaine too?
I'm sorry you never check
the bag in my head for a bomb
and my halo was a needle hole
Sorry I saw a priest being beaten
and I made a wish

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., “Disposable Teens.”

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., “Target Audience (Narcissus Narcosis).”

¹¹⁰ The author Aldous Huxley (*Brave New World*) died on the same day that Kennedy was assassinated; coverage of his death was completely overshadowed by the reporting on Kennedy.

At the end of both verses, the narrator dismisses the blame that he ironically took on, then in the chorus, denounces “the old deceivers” that obscure the true sources of vice in society:

...but I’m just a pitiful anonymous

And I see all the young believers
Your target audience
I see all the old deceivers
and we all just sing their song

Outside of the context of the *Holy Wood* narrative, “Target Audience” functions as a scathing response to the reports that blamed Manson for the Columbine attack. From Manson’s perspective, “the old deceivers” scapegoat rock stars like Marilyn Manson in order to distract from the culpability shared by all of American society.¹¹¹ However, the bridge of the song suggests that from Adam’s perspective, the primary “deceiver” is The Father, and that the Valley of Death is “free” because its inhabitants are not deceived by The Father’s propaganda:

The valley of death, we are free
Your father’s your prison, you see

In “President Dead,” the narrator surveys the nature of this deception in detail: The Father sells violence, drugs, and religion as distractions to the “incubated and jet set” citizens.¹¹² Both the snarky tone of the lyrics (“getting high on violence, *baby*,” “we just can’t seem to ever remember...” etc.) and Manson’s sing-song vocals suggest that “President Dead” comes from Adam’s disparaging viewpoint, rather than someone actually transfixed by the cult of violence in Holy Wood.

This is for the people, they want you

¹¹¹ Marilyn Manson, “Columbine: Whose Fault Is It?” *Rolling Stone* (24 June 1999).

¹¹² Ibid., “President Dead,” *Holy Wood (In The Shadow Of The Valley Of Death)*. Nothing Records: 490 790-2, 2000, CD.

Getting high on violence, baby

President Dead is clueless¹¹³
and he's caught in a headlight, police-state god
and his skull is stained glass

Incubated and jet set,
the bitter thinkers buy their tickets
to go find God like a piggy in a fair

and we don't want to live forever
and we know that suffering is so much better

give the pills time to work,
we can't all be martyred in the
winter of our discontent

every night we are nailed into place and
every night we just can't seem to
ever remember the reason why

Like in "The Speed Of Pain" (*Mechanical Animals*), the first appearance of acoustic guitar in "In The Shadow Of The Valley Of Death" marks an unexpected moment of emotional vulnerability for the protagonist *Holy Wood*.¹¹⁴ Manson sings in his lower mid-register, with pure melody and natural production, for both verses of the song, giving the narrator an earnest tone as he admits to personal feelings of worthlessness:

We have no future
heaven wasn't made for me
we burn ourselves to hell
as fast as it can be
and I wish that I could be the king
then I'd know that I am not alone

Maggots put on shirts
sell each other shit
sometimes I feel so worthless
sometimes I feel discarded

¹¹³ Given the many references to Kennedy throughout the Triptych, it seems likely that this line is primarily a reference to his assassination.

¹¹⁴ Marilyn Manson, "In The Shadow Of The Valley Of Death," *Holy Wood (In The Shadow Of The Valley Of Death)*. Nothing Records: 490 790-2, 2000, CD.

I wish that I was good enough
then I'd know that I am not alone

In the bridge of the song, Manson uses his falsetto range, resulting in an eerie sound fitting of the morbid lyrics. Furthermore, drums and an electric guitar enter with a lament bass line, enhancing the mood of doom:

Death is policeman
Death is the priest
Death is the stereo
Death is a TV
Death is the Tarot
Death is an angel and
Death is our God
killing us all

Finally, for the outro, the two vocal styles used on the song are layered on top of each other, combining the emotive sound of the verses and the ominous quality of the bridge, as the narrator concludes that his suffering and, ultimately, his destruction is inevitable:

she put the seeds in me
plant this dying tree
she's a burning string
and I'm just the ashes

“Cruci-fiction in Space” introduces the first marked feelings of conviction in the narrator.¹¹⁵ Musically, the band totally abandons the expressive sound of “In The Shadow...” as the bass and electric guitar relentlessly play the same power chord over and over for the first verse of the song. The lyrics of this verse-chorus rotation relate images of religion and violence in a series of “what-if” scenarios:

this is evolution
the monkey
the man
and then the gun

¹¹⁵ Ibid., “Cruci-fiction in Space.”

if Christ was in Texas
the hammer
the sickle
the only son
this is your creation
the atom of Eden
was a bomb
if Jack was the Baptist
we'd drink wine
from his head

this is evolution
the monkey
the man
and then the gun

In the second verse, Adam echoes the unusual description of being nailed to a cross heard in “Godeatgod,” declaring himself to be a Christ-like revolutionary leader:

I am a revolution
pull my knuckles down
if I could
I am a revelation
and I'm nailed
to the Holy Wood

Then, in the bridge of the song, Adam admits to the inevitability and futility of revolution; the outro of the song supports the theme of futility with the use of eerie noise effects, heavy vocal processing, and the addition of the line “flies are waiting” to the end of the chorus:

we are dead and tomorrow's canceled
because of things we did yesterday
we are dead and tomorrow's canceled
they crucify us in our space
in our space
in our space...
... flies are waiting.

In “A Place In The Dirt,” Adam continues to address the fate of death awaiting the revolutionaries, but expresses a wish to become a martyr:

Put me in the motorcade
put me in the death parade
dress me up and make me
dress me up and make me
your dying god¹¹⁶

The verses use a similarly sparse and static accompaniment, with one note repeated over and over, but the band gradually adds layers of sound until the full rock ensemble breaks out in the chorus. The sinister longing of the narrator to lead his followers to “our perfect perfect place in the sun and in the dirt...the shadow of our perfect death” with underproduced vocals. However, when he addresses his own personal conviction to become a martyr in the chorus, he changes to overproduction, expressing not longing, but grim determination.

The third cycle, “Of Red Earth,” begins with “The Nobodies,” which uses a similar technique of gradually-accumulating musical intensity to mirror a transformation from uncertainty to resolution in the narrator (*I.I.I Analyzing Subversive Narratives*).¹¹⁷ In “The Death Song,” Adam’s revolution comes to fruition.¹¹⁸ The first line of the song alludes to Adam as “The Bullet” as he leads his followers in a violent attack on Holy Wood that will almost certainly end with their deaths:

We're on a bullet
and we're headed straight into god
even he'd like to end it too
we take a pill, get a face
buy our ticket
and we hope that heaven's true
I saw a cop beat a priest on the TV

¹¹⁶ Ibid., “A Place In The Dirt.”

¹¹⁷ Ibid., “The Nobodies.”

¹¹⁸ Ibid., “The Death Song.”

and they know they killed our heroes too

However, in the chorus, Adam suggests that it doesn't matter if they die, because they have no future, anyways, and it's the only way they can be remembered like the celebrated martyrs of Holy Wood. In the final, varied chorus, Adam alludes to the sentiment of "Man That You Fear" (*Antichrist Superstar*) that although they were valued as children, the world has rejected what they grew up to be:

We sing the death song kids
because we've got no future
and we want to be just like you
and we want to be just like you

We were the world
but we've got no future
and we want to be just like you
we want to be just like you

"Lamb of God" doesn't connect directly to the narrative of Adam's revolution, or even necessarily to Adam himself.¹¹⁹ Rather, it reflects more broadly on the concept of the "media martyr," with allusions to Christ, Kennedy, and Lennon:

There was Christ in the metal shell
there was blood on the pavement
The camera will make you god
That's how Jack became sainted

If you die when there's no one watching
Then your ratings drop and you're forgotten
But if they kill you on their TV
You're a martyr and a lamb of god

There was Lennon in the happy gun
There were words on the pavement
We were looking for the lamb of god
We were looking for Mark David¹²⁰

If you die when there's no one watching

¹¹⁹ Ibid., "Lamb of God."

¹²⁰ Mark David Chapman, who assassinated John Lennon.

Then your ratings drop and you're forgotten
But if they kill you on their TV
You're a martyr and a lamb of god

It took three days for him to die
The born again could buy the serial rights¹²¹
Lamb of god have mercy on us
Lamb of god won't you grant us

The post-chorus hook of “Lamb of God” (“Nothing’s going to change the world”) suggests that Adam’s revolution has been unsuccessful in uprooting the authority of Celebretarianism in Holy Wood. The most striking moment of the song occurs at the end of the bridge (“Lamb of god, won’t you grant us...”). The expected conclusion to the traditional Catholic text *Agnus Dei*, “grant us peace,” is interrupted by the return of the bridge (“Nothing’s going to change”), insinuating that a peaceful future is impossible.

The tragic sound of “Lamb of God” is completely undermined by the upbeat, synth-heavy “Born Again.”¹²² Both the sudden change in sonic affect and the lyrical content suggest that Adam’s revolutionary ideals have been assimilated into the superficial culture of Holy Wood:

Do you or don't you want this to be your song?
It doesn't take a rebel to sing along.
This art is weak
in its pretty, pretty frame
and I am a monkey with
a misspelled name
"I'll put down your disco
and take you heart away"
I'll be born again

I'm someone else
I'm someone new
I'm someone stupid just like you

¹²¹ “Serial rights” are sold to media outlets, giving them legal rights to be the first to publish a story; this line suggests that Christ’s death was used to generate profit.

¹²² Marilyn Manson, “Born Again,” *Holy Wood (In The Shadow Of The Valley Of Death)*. Nothing Records: 490 790-2, 2000, CD.

I'm someone else
I'm someone new
I'm someone stupid just like you

do you or don't you want to take this hit?
Does it make you feel like you're a part of "it."
"I'll put down your disco
and take you heart away"
I am born again

In the bridge of the song, an allusion to both Holy Wood and the Valley of Death conflate the two settings into one (“the valley of the dolls is the valley of the dead”). This unification references the chorus of “Godeatgod,” in which Adam referred to his followers as “dolls that [he] made.” The revolution’s assimilation into Holy Wood becomes yet another object of Adam’s sardonic contempt in “Burning Flag”:

They wanna sell it out
Buy it up
Dumb it down
A good god is hard to find
I'll join the crowd
That wants to see me dead
Right now I feel I belong for the first time

Multiply your death
Divide by sex
Add up the violence and what do you get?

We are all just stars and we're waiting
We are all just scarred and we're hating
We are all just stars on your burning flag

You point the gun at me
And hope it'll go away
If god was alive
He would hate you anyway

My right wing is flapping
My left one is gray
Let's hear it for the kids but
Nothing they say
They gyrate and g-rate on election day

We got our ABC and our F-U-C-K
F-U-C-K
F-U-C-K

Multiply your death
Divide by sex
Add up the violence and what do you get?

We are all just stars and we're waiting
We are all just scarred and we're hating
We are all just stars on your burning flag

You point the gun at me
And hope it'll go away
If god was alive
He would hate you anyway

We are all just stars and we're waiting
We are all just scarred and we're hating
We are all just stars on your burning flag¹²³

“Burning Flag” is almost twice as fast as “Born Again” (132 to 260 BPM). It makes prominent use of hemiolas, diminished harmonies, and scream vocals, which all contribute to an aggressive, defiant sound, revealing Adam’s claims of conformity in the lyrics to be ironic.

The fourth cycle, “The Fallen,” depicts the aftermath of the revolution, beginning with “Coma Black.” With a much slower tempo, simpler accompaniment, and natural, melodic singing, the narrator sounds much more earnest than on “Burning Flag.” In “Coma Black,” Adam bitterly regrets the destruction that he has caused:

My mouth was a crib and it was growing lies
I didn't know what love was on that day
my heart's a tiny blood clot
I picked at it
it never heals it never goes away

I burned all the good things in The Eden Eye
we were too dumb to run too dead to die

¹²³ Ibid., “Burning Flag.”

I burned all the good things in The Eden Eye
we were too dumb to run too dead to die

This was never my world
you took the angel away
I'd kill myself to make everybody pay
This was never my world
you took the angel away
I'd kill myself to make everybody pay

I would have told her then
she was the only thing
I could love in this dying world
but the simple word "love" itself
already died and went away

“Coma Black” introduces a new character to the narrative, a vaguely-identified woman (similar to Coma White on *Mechanical Animals*).¹²⁴ However, almost as soon as this mysterious character appears, she dies. In *Mechanical Animals*, Coma White represented pure perfection; *Holy Wood*'s Coma Black, on the other hand, heralds in corruption and disenchantment. In “Valentine’s Day,” Holy Wood mourns her loss, but only superficially:

She was the color of T.V.
Her mouth curled under like a metal snake
Although Holy Wood was sad
They'd remember this as Valentine's day

The song has a heavy, serious sound due to its slow tempo (68 BPM) and thick guitar chords. Manson’s voice, while melodic and mostly in his middle register, is doubled and distorted through much of the song, creating a menacing, inhuman quality. After the first verse, this foreboding quality supports the song’s warning about the inescapability of death:

Flies are waiting
In the Shadow of the Valley of Death

¹²⁴ Ibid., “Coma Black.”

In the Shadow of the Valley of Death

They slit our wrists and send us to heaven
The first flower after the flood

I saw that pregnant girl today
She didn't know that it was dead inside
Even though it was alive
Some of us are really born to die

The next song, “The Fall Of Adam,” uses the same tempo as “Valentine’s Day,” but begins with acoustic guitar and a background sound effect of explosions.¹²⁵ The song articulates its main idea in one verse:

The Abraham Lincoln town cars arrive
To dispose of our king and queen
They orchestrated dramatic new scenes
for Celebritarian™ needs
When one world ends
Something else begins
But without a scream
Just a whisper because we just
Start it over again...

Although the old regime has fallen, another one has risen in its place; after Manson sings, “we just start it over again,” a heavy electric guitar line and a loud backbeat take over, repeated until the end of the song as Manson’s heavily filtered voice screams out variations on The Father’s chorus from “The Love Song.” This implies that not only did Adam’s revolution fail to change Holy Wood, but Adam himself has taken over as a new dictator. The following track, “King Kill 33,” supports this reading:

Is this what you wanted?
This is what you get.
Turned all your lives into this shit.
You never accepted or treated me fair
Blame me for what I believe and I wear.
You fucked yourselves and you
Raised these sheep

¹²⁵ Ibid., “The Fall Of Adam.”

The blue and the withered seeds you will reap.
You never gave me a chance to be me
Or even a fucking chance just to be.
But I have to show you that you played a role
And I will destroy you with one simple hole.
The world that hates me has taken its toll
But now I have finally taken control.
You wanted so bad to make me this thing
And I want you now to just kill the king...

And I am not sorry, and I am not sorry
This is what you deserve
And I am not sorry, and I am not sorry
This is what you deserve
I am not sorry, and I am not sorry
This is what you deserve¹²⁶

Thus, Adam's "fall" was, in fact, his rise to power; his own revolution corrupted him. The first stanza of "King Kill 33" is recited with an unpitched scream; Manson whispers the refrain. Both create an unsympathetic, fearsome tone for Adam in this penultimate stage of his narrative; he has become exactly the type of unfeeling tyrant that he despised in the first place. The final song of *Holy Wood*, "Count To Six And Die (The Vacuum Of Infinite Space Encompassing)" brings Adam's story to an ultimate close, as he encounters the mysterious woman once more in the afterlife (see 3.1.3 *Tempo and Meter*).¹²⁷ However, even facing damnation, Adam refuses to "ask forgiveness;" he still holds society as a whole accountable for motivating him to revolt.

¹²⁶ Ibid., "King Kill 33."

¹²⁷ Ibid., "Count To Six And Die (The Vacuum Of Infinite Space Encompassing)."

CHAPTER 4

THE LAST ROCK STAR

“When one world ends,
something else begins,
but without a scream—
just a whisper because we
just start it over again”

Marilyn Manson, “The Fall of Adam” (*Holy Wood*)

4.1 Terminal Subversion in the Triptych

Over the course of the three albums of the *Antichrist* Triptych, Marilyn Manson dismantled the institution of celebrity in American culture by taking on the personas of cartoonishly extreme “rock stars” and using the stories of how these characters were corrupted by fame.

Antichrist Superstar began with the isolated and self-loathing Worm feeling as though he had been abused by society. He eventually “gets his wings” and climbs to stardom, but the Worm’s new-found celebrity led him further into hatred for humanity and ultimately empowered him to unleash an apocalypse. In *Mechanical Animals*, fame destroyed both Alpha, an outsider, and Omēga, an insider. Both protagonists became obsessed with Coma White (perfection personified) but were never able to live up to her ideals. Alpha responded by embracing a hedonistic lifestyle to numb his pain, while Omēga realized that he couldn’t fill the emptiness of their life with drugs or sex. The citizens of *Holy Wood* literally worship celebrities who had been martyred by the media after their deaths. These citizens are sold violence and religion to keep them happy and distracted.

Adam, a social outcast, rejected these cultural norms and led a revolution against Holy Wood. This revolution succeeded, but Adam was ultimately corrupted by power and became an unfeeling demagogue.

Although these personas serve as the literary “protagonists” of the Triptych, the “revolutionary” characters of the Worm and Adam are ultimately *vilified* in the conclusions of their albums, as the Worm becomes the Antichrist and is consumed by hatred, and Adam ascends to power and echoes the words of *Holy Wood’s* primary antagonist, The Father.

In his portrayal of these characters, Manson adopted an aesthetic of the grotesque, using imagery that provokes controversy, shock, and fear in combination with depictions of the most sacred elements of American society: Christianity and celebrity. Marilyn Manson’s aim in juxtaposing these elements was to reflect the undesirable aspects of American culture and force their audiences to confront what they would rather ignore. The “grotesque” appears in many forms throughout the Triptych. The band uses abnormal and disturbing imagery in their visuals (dirty medical equipment, body modifications, fascist symbolism, etc.) and lyrics (expressions of violence and hatred). The band also uses a mixture of heavy metal sounds, synthesizers, and atonal noise typical of industrial metal, resulting in a musical sound that tends to be abrasive and unpleasant compared with most commercial music. Finally, Manson’s extreme vocal techniques, which distort the sound of his voice into something beyond human, allow him to express exaggerated emotions in his personas, often malice or hatred. For an effective analysis of meaning in Marilyn Manson’s music, however, it is vitally important to distinguish between the motivations and actions of the fictional protagonists of the Triptych.

Because Marilyn Manson undermined the institution of celebrity in the Triptych through narratives that testify to its destructive and corrupting power, the emergence of a new “rock star” after Marilyn Manson would be ideologically at odds with the “aesthetic programme of authenticity” that defined rock music in twentieth century.¹²⁸

4.2 A Changing Industry

“Now there is an incredible lack of patience for developing artists. Where you program for your parent company’s immediate gratification, you sign stuff that’s easy to digest, not what you consider brilliant.”

— Ben Shapiro, former co-president of Atlantic Records¹²⁹

Around the time that Manson’s success peaked, radical changes in the music industry, and in popular media as a whole, fundamentally reshaped the means and manners by which musicians interacted with the public. Consequently, the phenomena that had previously characterized the archetypal “rock star” became obsolete by the turn of the century. Recording companies no longer had the luxury of experimenting with subversive bands such as Marilyn Manson that had the potential to become superstars, but were just as likely to be rejected by consumers. The commercial success of a such a contrarian figure as Marilyn Manson was astonishing even in the late nineties; today, this success would be almost unimaginable.

The concentration of the record industry to a few companies, which are in turn held by even larger media corporations, has forced producers to focus on palatable artists that generate immediate profits. In *Sells Like Teen Spirit*, Ryan Moore writes, “More people have greater access to the tools of media production and communication, but anything that

¹²⁸ Richard Middleton, “Rock,” *Grove Music Online* (2001), accessed March 29, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.49135>.

¹²⁹ Ryan Moore, *Sells Like Teen Spirit*, New York: New York University Press (2010), p. 199.

is popular enough to be consumed by a large audience inevitably falls under the domain of corporations that maximize profit by expanding the scope of the commodity form.”¹³⁰ In general, this shift has led to the domination of the popular music market by musicians who provide easily-digestible material with wide appeal. Meanwhile, subversive artists, who fashion their music and overall aesthetic to be provocative and upsetting to the mass public, have been largely pushed out of mainstream music (and by extension, out of the media spotlight that had previously characterized the “rock star”).

In the twenty-first century, there are several highly successful “pop” artists who might be identified as subversive, such as Lady Gaga. However, as reporter Scott Timberg wrote:

The term “subversive” was used with neither irony nor praise during the Red Scare of the 1950s...and the McCarran Act created the Subversive Activities Control Board to help identify and prosecute these dangerous and seditious elements...So how did it become a term people would apply to an overhyped singer who once donned a dress made of raw beef?...P.R. and advertising—which co-opts everything—wandered in and began applying the term to products companies wanted to sell.¹³¹

Timberg points out an obvious critique of labelling corporate pop stars as “subversive”: they simply aren’t seen as “dangerous” to society. While artists such as Lady Gaga sometimes use their music and performance to question certain *elements* of culture, they never call for radical change or revolution. If they did, they would never achieve commercial success in the incorporated economy of the twenty-first century record industry.

¹³⁰ Ibid., pp. 199-200.

¹³¹ Scott Timberg, “Stop calling corporate pop stars “subversive”: Gaga has nothing on actual dissidents like Ai Weiwei,” *Salon Magazine* (10 February 2015), accessed April 24, 2019, https://www.salon.com/2015/02/09/stop_calling_corporate_pop_stars_%E2%80%9Csubversive%E2%80%9D_gaga_has_nothing_on_actual_dissidents_like_ai_weiwei/.

Of course, there are still plenty of subversive musicians today who have achieved a comparable level of stardom to the rock stars of the post-war twentieth century, most notably in the genre of hip-hop and rap, which grew out of hip-hop. Beyond the stylistic differences that distinguish hip-hop and rap from rock music, their particular subversions were shaped by the communities in which they developed. Whereas rock, from its beginnings, was produced by and for white audiences and protested issues within white culture. Hip-hop, on the other hand, was created in urban African-American communities, and primarily addresses the problems facing those communities in particular. As rap grew out of the hip-hop scene and spread to wider audiences, not only in America, but internationally, its protests generally focused on the difficulties that arise from systemic racism in America. As these issues receive more and more attention, the commercial viability of rap increases, as more audiences generally support the protests expressed in rap music.

4.3 The Aging Antichrist



Figure 4.1: Banner Advertisement for *Heaven Upside Down* (2017) from www.marilynmanson.com

Manson has remained active as a recording artist since the Triptych era, albeit with a completely new band. After a decade's worth of poorly-received releases, Manson has

largely abandoned the extreme aesthetic of the grotesque that had been so effective in the Triptych with his most recent efforts, *The Pale Emperor* (2015) and *Heaven Upside Down* (2017). The banner advertisement above epitomizes the “new Manson.” While Manson has continued to explore the traditional themes of goth rock, he uses a more refined, understated sound and more sophisticated, less “shocking” imagery. Despite Manson’s noticeable aging, he has managed to transition away from the controversy-courting “shock-rock” that made him famous, thus maintaining his status as a commercially-viable artist in a changing industry.

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BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Hannah Waterman began her career at the University of Texas at Arlington as a cello performance major and served as the principle cellist of the UTA Symphony Orchestra throughout her undergraduate studies. After completing a summer research project on narrative and form in concerti, she began making plans for a career in music scholarship. Waterman continued her studies in music theory with a research assistantship under Dr. Graham Hunt in Fall 2017 and a summer seminar on contemporary music theory in Paris offered by the Eastman School of Music. She presented her original paper on musical form, “The Introductory Dominant,” at three peer-reviewed conferences in March 2019. After graduating from UTA with an Honors degree in music theory, Waterman will pursue a Ph.D. in music history, theory, and ethnomusicology at Stony Brook University in New York.