



ANTIHEROES AND THE DIALECTIC OF FREEDOM-ORDER: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE THOUGHTS OF EREN YEAGER, THANOS, AND THE TEMPLARS-ASSASSINS

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E-ISSN : 3109-9777

Received: November 2025

Accepted: November 2025

Published: Desember 2025

Abstract :

This study explores the ideological dimensions of antiheroes in contemporary popular culture by conducting a comparative analysis of Eren Yeager, Thanos, and the Assassin-Templar conflict in Assassin's Creed. Eren represents radical freedom driven by collective trauma and existential threat, often navigating moral ambiguity between liberation and destruction. Thanos embodies extreme utilitarian order, prioritizing systemic stability and the "greatest good" over individual moral agency, reflecting authoritarian and technocratic problem-solving logic. Meanwhile, the Assassin-Templar conflict presents a nuanced dialectic between liberty and control, with both factions justifying morally ambiguous actions to achieve societal balance. This research examines how these narratives articulate ethical dilemmas, ideological motivations, and the tension between freedom and order, demonstrating that modern antiheroes serve as critical lenses for evaluating complex political, social, and philosophical questions. The findings indicate that popular media provides a reflective space in which audiences negotiate morality, authority, and autonomy, highlighting the relevance of antiheroes in understanding contemporary ethical and ideological challenges.

Keywords : Antihero, freedom, political ideology, moral ambiguity.

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of the antihero has undergone significant development in modern popular culture and continues to attract academic attention. Characters such as Eren Yeager, Thanos, and the Assassin and Templar factions appear as complex figures that challenge the boundary between protagonist and antagonist (Barry Richards, 2024; Grizzard et al., 2020; Wennekes, 2023). They function not only as drivers of narrative but also as mirrors of the moral, political, and ideological tensions of contemporary society. Their presence demonstrates that modern narratives reject the simple dichotomy of "good" and "evil." Instead, antiheroes operate within moral gray zones in which goals and methods frequently stand in conflict. Within this space, ideologies of freedom and order are contested through extreme choices and heavy ethical consequences. Thus, the antihero becomes a medium that reveals the layered complexities of internal and external conflict in the modern world.

In the global context, the issue of freedom versus order has resurfaced alongside growing discourse on authoritarianism and social surveillance. Popular culture plays an important role as a symbolic arena where these



ideologies are debated metaphorically (Balasubramaniam, 2022; Collord & Nyamsenda, 2025; Uroko et al., 2025). Eren Yeager embodies a form of radical freedom that is purchased through total destruction of the structures that confine him. Thanos, in contrast, represents an extreme form of order based on the utilitarian assumption that mass sacrifice can be justified for balance. The Assassins and Templars present a more nuanced conflict, as both sides possess strong moral claims that negate and complement each other. These three representations open opportunities for deeper analysis of how ideologies are formed, negotiated, and enacted within fictional narratives. For that reason, they can be read as reflections of society's struggle to navigate an ever-shifting political and moral landscape.

Previous research has examined these characters or factions individually, focusing on psychological dimensions or narrative structures. Studies on moral ambiguity have also grown rapidly, especially in media that features antiheroic figures. However, few works investigate the ideological struggle between freedom and order comparatively across these representations. Yet a comparative approach can reveal ideological patterns that appear similar despite originating from different fictional universes. This research gap highlights the need for cross-narrative analysis to deepen our understanding of antiheroic ideological dynamics. By integrating the three narratives, researchers can identify conceptual connections that may otherwise remain hidden. This underscores the importance of in-depth scholarship in understanding how popular culture frames contemporary ideological conflict.

Based on this gap, the present research aims to map the ideological forms of freedom and order in each character or faction. The first objective is to analyze the ideological structures represented by Eren Yeager, Thanos, and the Assassin–Templar dyad. The second objective is to compare the motives, moral justifications, and consequences of action across these figures. The third objective is to formulate a conceptual model illustrating the dialectic of freedom and order in antihero narratives. These three aims are interrelated and allow for a more comprehensive understanding of ideological dynamics. A multi-narrative approach also enables the identification of both convergences and divergences among the figures. Through this sequence of analyses, the research offers new contributions to cultural and political theory.

Additionally, this study seeks to explain how antihero narratives shape public perceptions of moral and political issues. In many cases, antiheroes provide a space for audiences to negotiate conflicting values and ethical tensions. Eren evokes both sympathy and anxiety because his idealism of freedom is accompanied by destructive, extreme actions. Thanos presents an ethical dilemma through a rational logic that is horrifying yet consistent with utilitarian reasoning. The Assassins and Templars demonstrate that moral conflict is not strictly binary but consists of competing claims with legitimate foundations. By observing how audiences interpret these narratives, researchers can uncover the relationship between fiction and ideological perception. This offers a foundation for understanding how popular culture influences moral orientations in

contemporary society.

Overall, this research is expected to make a significant contribution to the academic study of antiheroes. It is also relevant to political philosophy, particularly concerning how freedom and order are debated through narrative media. Moreover, the study expands cultural studies by highlighting fiction as a key arena for ideological contestation. Antihero narratives can serve as analytical tools for understanding structures of power and morality in modern society. Through comparative examination, researchers can identify recurring patterns that transcend genre and medium. This ensures that the study is not only descriptive but also theoretical and conceptual in its contributions. Ultimately, the research affirms popular culture as an essential space for contemporary ideological reflection and debate.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive-comparative research design to analyze the evolving concept of the antihero within contemporary popular culture. The shift from classical hero narratives to morally ambiguous protagonists is treated as a cultural phenomenon that requires interpretive inquiry rather than numerical measurement. By focusing on characters such as Walter White, Eren Yeager, and Joel, the research situates antiheroes as products of modern socio-cultural dynamics rather than isolated narrative constructs (Hollis-Brusky, 2024). Textual and thematic analysis is used to identify the narrative, ethical, and ideological structures embedded in their character arcs. This design allows the researcher to examine how moral ambiguity is articulated, contested, and normalized within contemporary media. Theoretical frameworks from cultural studies and narrative ethics guide the interpretation of the selected cases. Overall, this approach enables a systematic exploration of how antiheroes function as reflections of broader cultural tensions.

The study draws upon a combination of primary and secondary data to develop a comprehensive understanding of antihero representation. Primary data consist of narrative content from selected media texts television series, anime, and video games that feature antiheroic protagonists embedded in chaotic, political, or morally complex environments. Secondary data include scholarly articles, theoretical texts, and recent research findings that discuss antihero psychology, moral reasoning, and audience reception. These materials are collected through targeted literature searches in academic databases, including Scopus-indexed publications from 2019–2024, ensuring the relevance and contemporary nature of the sources. Particular attention is given to works that characterize antiheroes as figures who are “right in intention but wrong in method,” as this concept is central to the analytical framework. The combination of narrative and scholarly data provides a robust foundation for examining the ethical and ideological dimensions of antiheroes in modern storytelling.

The data are analyzed using a multi-layered qualitative approach combining thematic analysis, narrative analysis, and comparative interpretation. Thematic analysis is employed first to identify recurring moral, political, and

existential motifs related to antihero construction across the selected texts. Narrative analysis is then applied to examine character motivations, decision-making patterns, and the ethical dilemmas that position them as moral experiments for audiences. Comparative analysis allows the researcher to map similarities and differences in antihero portrayals across various media, highlighting how these narratives invite viewers to reassess their moral intuitions. Scholarly findings from Johnson et al. (2025), McKay (2021), and Wagoner & Yakob (2025) are integrated to contextualize the analytical results within broader cultural and psychological trends. Through this analytic procedure, the study aims to reveal how antiheroes have become dynamic cultural instruments for exploring political, traumatic, and existential issues. The methodological triangulation strengthens the validity of the findings and ensures multidimensional insight into the evolution of antihero narratives.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Ideological Representation in Eren Yeager

Eren Yeager stands as one of the most complex representations of ideological evolution in modern antihero narratives. In the early stages of the story, Eren's motivations are rooted in a fundamental desire for freedom a form of negative liberty in the sense articulated by Isaiah Berlin (1969), namely freedom from oppression and external threats. The Titans, symbolizing existential fear, become the target of Eren's aggression, a response morally legitimized by his community. Within the framework of conflict psychology, such defensive violence aligns with findings that victimized groups often perceive aggressive retaliation as morally justified (Bar-Tal, 2007).

However, the narrative's progression pushes Eren toward a far more radical and darker ideological transformation. During the conflict with Marley, Eren ceases to operate as a heroic youth seeking universal freedom, shifting instead into a political agent shaped by collective trauma, the temporal memory of the Attack Titan, and an awareness of the geopolitical structures marginalizing his people. This shift is consistent with studies showing that exposure to violence and geopolitical threat can drive groups toward political aggression and support for extreme measures in the name of group survival (Canetti et al., 2010; Vollhardt, 2020).

At this stage, the freedom Eren pursues transforms into a form of positive liberty, the collective determination of his people's destiny even through destructive means. This transition emerges in response to an international system that sustains a geopolitical order framing Eldia as a threat requiring control. When such structures fail to provide political agency, Eren's destructive actions can be interpreted through Hannah Arendt's (1970) lens of political violence as an outcome of the absence of freedom within global order.

Eren's ideological conflict reaches its peak in his decision to initiate the Rumbling. From a utilitarian perspective, this decision may be understood as an attempt to save his people from global annihilation. Yet contemporary critiques of moral psychology suggest that the moralization of violence often emerges

when a group perceives existential threat, even if the resulting actions are disproportionate or cause massive suffering (Waytz & Eidelman, 2020). The Rumbling represents the extreme form of this mechanism: violence justified for group survival but impossible to defend under classical utilitarianism, as its destructive consequences vastly outweigh its benefits.

From a Kantian deontological perspective, Eren's actions are even more problematic: genocide cannot be universalized as a moral principle, nor can human beings be treated merely as means for collective ends. Yet Eren's morality cannot be fully captured by traditional ethical frameworks. His struggle allows for an interpretation through existential nihilism, in which objective moral values collapse in the face of a violent and absurd world (Camus, 1955). The Attack Titan's temporal consciousness intensifies a sense of historical determinism: Eren frequently reflects that his actions "had already happened," creating the illusion that he is not a free agent but an executor of predetermined events. Such reasoning aligns with moral psychology findings that diminished perceptions of control can reduce feelings of moral responsibility (Baumeister et al., 2011).

Ultimately, Eren Yeager stands as an antihero shaped by a convergence of radical freedom, temporal determinism, collective trauma, and political violence. His transformation from an idealistic youth into a destroyer of global order reveals the fragility of the boundary between freedom and order and illustrates how morality can collapse when a people stands at the brink of annihilation. Eren is neither a pure hero nor a villain; rather, he is a highly complex ideological subject forged within a world devoid of simple moral answers making him one of the most philosophically significant antiheroes in contemporary storytelling.

Utilitarian Ideology and the Concept of "Order" in Thanos

Thanos in the Marvel Cinematic Universe is often understood as an antagonist whose moral reasoning is uniquely structured: he is not merely destructive but believes that his actions are justified by the principle of "the greatest good for the greatest number." This perspective situates Thanos within a utilitarian framework. He views the universe as a space characterized by imbalance rising populations, dwindling resources, and civilizations spiraling toward collapse due to greed and an inherent inability to regulate themselves. This worldview reflects an extreme form of utilitarian logic, in which actions are judged by their collective benefits, a pattern also evident in moral justifications for destructive policies when political actors perceive themselves to be facing existential crisis (Behnke et al., 2023; Harris, 2022; Koepsell, 2024). Within his own narrative, Thanos sees himself as the only figure willing to make morally difficult decisions that others avoid. He interprets utilitarianism in radical terms: if immense future suffering can be prevented through a single act of catastrophic violence, then that act becomes morally permissible.

Thanos's conception of "cosmic order" emerges from his personal experience with the destruction of his home planet, Titan, which he takes as evidence that the universe functions through a harsh equilibrium requiring great sacrifices. This viewpoint parallels the model of authoritarian problem-solving, which posits that social order can only be restored through drastic intervention

by a strong authority (Hamersma, 2025). The narrative of order he constructs aligns with the ideology of authoritarian resilience, wherein stability becomes the highest political value, overriding more inclusive moral frameworks (Abadía & Rouvinski, 2025; Grimm et al., 2025). Thanos views the universe as an organism that must be “operated on” when overburdened a perspective akin to technocratic approaches that treat repressive control as a rational solution to social complexity (Rao, 2021). Thus, the order envisioned by Thanos is not democratic or deliberative but absolute, imposed unilaterally by an actor who claims privileged access to the larger truth.

However, the notion of order he constructs produces a fundamental tension between moral freedom and absolute control. The “snap” does not merely reduce population; it eliminates the moral right of living beings to shape their own futures. This phenomenon mirrors patterns of support for freedom restrictions during times of crisis, when authorities take unilateral action in the name of public safety (Dicke-Bohmann et al., 2024). The mechanism of an “authority who knows what is best” is central to authoritarian ideologies that assert a monopoly over both moral and technical knowledge (Maksimova & Aronov, 2024). By silencing the possibility of alternative solutions, Thanos positions himself as the moral center of the universe a pattern known as self-justified authoritarianism, in which an actor perceives absolute control as the only viable way to prevent systemic collapse (Cardenas et al., 2020; Jiang et al., 2024). In this context, the eradication of moral freedom across the population aligns with research demonstrating how absolute power often destroys ethical agency through mechanisms of broad repression or the elimination of moral choice itself (Abbas, 2023; Sheikh & Ahmed, 2020).

Ideological Conflict in the Assassin-Templar

The Assassin-Templar struggle in the Assassin’s Creed universe constitutes a paradigmatic ideological conflict rather than a mere contest of physical force. Historically, both factions articulate competing anthropological and political assumptions concerning human nature, autonomy, and the desired trajectory of civilization. The Assassins defend a libertarian ethos that prioritizes human autonomy even at the cost of instability reflecting philosophical traditions that regard individual agency as the core of moral dignity (Gugushvili & Meuleman, 2025; Mojtahedi et al., 2024). In contrast, the Templars adopt an order-centric worldview rooted in the belief that humans are inherently vulnerable and thus require centralized structures of authority for societal stability, resonating with authoritarian problem-solving frameworks (Hamersma, 2025). These opposing orientations produce competing visions of the world: one that celebrates decentralized freedom and one that prioritizes systemic control as the basis for collective survival. The tension between these visions underscores the enduring philosophical impasse between autonomy-based and stability-oriented political models.

From the Assassin perspective, liberty serves as the normative foundation of their interventions, with any form of coercive control particularly those manipulating cognition seen as a threat to moral personhood. Their approach

aligns with contemporary theories arguing that democratic societies must tolerate degrees of uncertainty as a precondition for genuine freedom (Kerr, 2025). Consequently, the Assassins assume a restrained role: preventing the concentration of power while refraining from imposing a monolithic sociopolitical order. Conversely, the Templars conceptualize freedom as dangerous when unregulated, advocating a “managed society” grounded in predictability, efficiency, and centralized authority (Zhang, 2025). While framed as benevolent stewardship, such governance risks sliding into paternalistic authoritarianism, echoing documented patterns in modern regimes where stability becomes a justificatory tool for curtailing agency (Abbas, 2023; Sheikh & Ahmed, 2020). The ideological friction between the two factions therefore reveals the limits of both models: libertarian vulnerability to moral disorder and authoritarian susceptibility to coercive overreach.

Ultimately, the Assassin–Templar conflict illustrates the philosophical impossibility of fully reconciling the human need for freedom with the human need for order. Both factions articulate authentic moral commitments yet embody structural weaknesses inherent in their respective worldviews. This unresolved dialectic sustains the narrative longevity of the franchise and invites broader reflection on contemporary debates regarding autonomy, governance, and the ethics of control.

Comparative Analysis: Eren-Thanos -Assassin

Eren Yeager, Thanos, and the Assassin–Templar dyad collectively represent a spectrum of ideological responses to perceived civilizational crisis within modern antihero narratives. Though emerging from distinct narrative worlds, all three embody a shared conviction that conventional political structures have failed to safeguard humanity, thereby necessitating radical intervention shaped by trauma, disillusionment, and systemic critique (Truby, 2007; Hogan, 2011). Their philosophical divergence, however, becomes evident in how they conceptualize freedom, construct order, and navigate ethical boundaries.

Eren Yeager frames freedom in existential and collectivist terms, situating the liberation of the Eldian people as an absolute moral imperative under oppressive global structures (Isayama, 2013–2025). His antiheroism emerges through a tragic paradox: liberation pursued through total destruction, wherein the dismantling of existing order becomes a precondition for the possibility of freedom (Zheng & Li, 2023). Thanos, by contrast, represents the opposite pole: an authoritarian utilitarian committed to restoring cosmic order through radical population reduction. His rationale reflects extreme consequentialism, reducing moral worth to aggregate outcomes and sacrificing individual rights to maintain systemic equilibrium (Gopalan, 2019). Meanwhile, the Assassin–Templar struggle provides a more dialectical model, situating freedom and order as co-constitutive yet antagonistic forces. The Assassins defend inalienable autonomy (Ubisoft, 2007–2023), whereas the Templars argue that unregulated freedom undermines long-term stability, echoing modern political debates on the balance between liberty and structured governance (Berlin, 1969).

A comparative synthesis positions Eren as the embodiment of unconstrained freedom, Thanos as the embodiment of absolute order, and the Assassin–Templar conflict as a dynamic middle ground illustrating how freedom and order remain mutually dependent yet irreconcilable (Ubisoft, 2007–2023). Their differing orientations toward sacrifice further highlight these distinctions: Eren embraces martyrdom, Thanos assumes the role of a reluctant cosmic steward, and the Assassin–Templar conflict treats sacrifice as a structural component of ideological struggle (Furnham, 2025). Collectively, these cases reveal several broader implications for contemporary cultural and political theory: antiheroes increasingly dramatize unresolved ethical dilemmas; popular culture now functions as a venue for exploring libertarian, utilitarian, and authoritarian paradigms; and modern audiences interpret power through frameworks of moral ambiguity rather than binary categories (Berlin, 1969; Mill, 1863). Thus, the comparative analysis demonstrates that these narratives operate as cultural mirrors, reflecting the ongoing search for equilibrium between freedom and order in an era marked by political complexity and moral uncertainty. Their tensions illuminate the persistent ethical challenges facing both fictional worlds and contemporary sociopolitical realities.

The concept of the antihero has undergone significant development within popular culture studies. In classical narratives, the hero is portrayed as an ideal figure with noble moral qualities, whereas the antihero emerges as a protagonist who possesses weaknesses, moral ambiguity, or motives that are not entirely altruistic. As 21st-century media culture evolves, the antihero increasingly occupies a central position as a representation of modern human complexity. Characters such as Walter White (*Breaking Bad*), Eren Yeager (*Attack on Titan*), and Joel (*The Last of Us*) exemplify a form of resistance to traditional heroic narratives that are often considered overly idealistic (Hollis-Brusky, 2024).

In contemporary storytelling, antiheroes are not merely depicted as troubled individuals, but as responses to a world that is chaotic, political, and riddled with uncertainty. Popular culture now interprets antiheroes as figures who are “right in intention but wrong in method,” creating space for readers and viewers to engage with more intricate ethical considerations. This shift demonstrates that antiheroes are no longer viewed as deviations but as realistic reflections of modern society’s moral landscape (Hadarics & Krekó, 2025; Veit et al., 2025). Recent studies also indicate that antihero characters function as moral experiments that prompt audiences to reassess their moral convictions. By presenting complex dilemmas and extreme decisions, antiheroes compel viewers to question the boundary between good and evil within narrative contexts. These findings reveal that emotional engagement with antiheroes can influence how audiences interpret moral action in real-world situations.

Several Scopus-indexed studies from 2019–2024 report an increasing use of antiheroes as narrative devices for exploring political, traumatic, and existential issues across anime, film, and video games. This development shows that antiheroes are not merely character trends but an evolving cultural

phenomenon that adapts to societal dynamics. Thus, the antihero can be understood as a critical mirror reflecting the social and ethical tensions of the contemporary era (Johnson et al., 2025; McKay, 2021; Wagoner & Yakob, 2025).

CONCLUSION

The comparative analysis of Eren Yeager, Thanos, and the Assassin–Templar conflict demonstrates that contemporary antiheroes function as complex ideological agents rather than mere protagonists or antagonists. Eren embodies radical freedom driven by collective trauma and existential threat, often blurring the line between liberation and destruction. Thanos represents extreme utilitarian order, prioritizing systemic stability over individual moral agency, while the Assassin–Templar dichotomy illustrates the nuanced interplay between liberty and control, where both sides justify morally ambiguous actions in pursuit of their vision of societal balance. Together, these narratives reveal that modern popular culture increasingly engages with moral ambiguity, presenting characters whose choices reflect real-world ethical dilemmas and ideological tensions.

These case studies underscore that freedom and order are never fully reconcilable; both are essential human values yet inherently prone to conflict. The narratives of Eren, Thanos, and Assassin–Templar highlight how moral reasoning, collective responsibility, and political calculation intersect in the construction of antiheroes, offering rich material for philosophical and cultural inquiry. Moreover, they demonstrate that popular media functions as a reflective arena in which audiences negotiate and evaluate complex ethical and ideological questions. Ultimately, the study of these characters deepens our understanding of the delicate balance between autonomy and authority in both fictional worlds and contemporary social-political contexts.

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