Spring 2019

Comic Characters: Campbellian* or Not?

Samantha Matos
Southeastern University - Lakeland, samatos1@seu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://firescholars.seu.edu/ccplus

Part of the Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons, Film and Media Studies Commons, and the Playwriting Commons

Samantha Matos

Dr. G. Veach

ENGL 1233 Survey of Old Testament

April 2nd, 2019

<div align="center">Comic Characters: Campbellian* or Not?</div>

There exists a peculiar pattern throughout numerous stories worldwide, which Joseph Campbell christens the 'monomyth' in his work, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1; Rickett; Kalliokoski 13; Koh 741; Thigpen 4, Gavaler 16). Matt Rickett recognizes that Campbell understands "…that every culture all around the globe had the same story beats in all their myths." If this is true, then the pattern should be evident in the superhero genre as well. I propose that the Iron Man, Spider-Man, and Batman characters, as they pertain to the *Iron Man*, *Spider-Man*, and *Batman Begins* movies, fit the monomyth theory. Arguing this idea will involve information concerning the various characters, their films, and the monomyth theory itself.

Background Information for Iron Man

First, it is beneficial to provide some background information for these fictional heroes. Stan Lee served as "…the art director, editor, and chief writer at Marvel Comics…" in 1963 (Robinson 824). That year, he unleashed a rather controversial character known as Tony Stark, whom Ashley Sufflé Robinson claims that audiences would have loathed (824). In an interview mentioned in "The Invincible Iron Man" (qtd. in Robinson), Lee discusses his controversial character: "I thought it would be fun to take the kind of character that nobody would like…and shove him down their throats and make them like him" (Robinson 824). Lee mentions in the same article (qtd. in Robinson) that Stark is a wealthy "weapons manufacturer" (Robinson 824).

One can conclude that his character proved to be an unexpected choice for a superhero in a time when America suffered through the Cold War and the war in Vietnam (Robinson 824).

Iron Man would go on to become one of Marvel's most iconic characters starring in a number of comic books, television shows, and movies. In fact, of the ten films which have the highest global grosses ever, Iron Man stars in three of them: *Marvel's The Avengers*, *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, and *Avengers: Infinity War* ("All Time Worldwide Box Office Grosses"). Notably, Robert Downey Jr. plays Tony Stark in the *Avengers* films, as well as in Mark Fergus's *Iron Man* (2008) and the two sequels ("All Time Worldwide Box Office Grosses"; Fergus). His performance remains among the most famous representations of the character and began with the first *Iron Man.* This film displays the origin story of a conceited billionaire who transforms into a superhero. Stark is abducted by terrorists, then invents a metal suit which he uses to combat his enemies and escape. After returning to the States, Stark builds an improved model of the suit, which he uses to fight criminals (Fergus).

Background Information for Spider-Man

The character of Spider-Man shares certain elements with Iron Man, such as being a superhero who possesses, as Jonathan J. Sanford puts it, "massive appeal" (2). His popularity is supported by the fact that the movie *Spider-Man* grossed $403,706,375 ("All Time Worldwide Box Office Grosses"; "Superhero Movies at the Box Office"). Moreover, the Spider-Man character made it in five of the top twenty highest grossing superhero films from 1978 to the current year ("Superhero Movies at the Box Office"). In further similarity to Iron Man, Spider-Man is yet another Marvel character attributed to Stan Lee (Sanford 2). In fact, Lee introduced the young crimefighter in *Amazing Fantasy #15*, the year before Stark's first comic (Sanford 2). The hero's adventures progressed beyond comics to include television, a Broadway show, and

movies (Van de Water 23; Sanford 2). One such film, Koepp's *Spider-Man,* tells the tale of Peter Parker, a brainy teenager who receives arachnid-themed superpowers after being bitten by a spider that was enhanced for scientific purposes (Koepp; Koh 735; Van de Water 31). Throughout the tragic origin story, Parker learns to value responsibility and to utilize his spectacular abilities to protect New York's citizens against those who would hurt them (Koepp).

Background Information for Batman

In contrast to Marvel's wise-cracking wall-crawler, Detective Comics (DC) provided the world with a darker warrior (Sanford 3; Gavaler 17 for DC). Bob Kane and Bill Finger's Batman debuted in 1939, in *Detective Comics #27* (Gavaler 17; Thigpen 4). The superhero went on to thrill fans through television and movies as well as comics (Gavaler 17; Thigpen 4; Van de Water 23). Furthermore, Wesley Colin Van de Water acknowledges the masked defender as one of the "…oldest surviving superheroes in existence" (18, 23). Impressively, from 1989 to 2017, Batman has appeared in twelve movies ("Batman Movies at the Box Office"; Whedon). One of those films, *Batman Begins*, was directed by Christopher Nolan and details Bruce Wayne's story of becoming a legendary crusader for justice in his city (Goyer; Van de Water 109, 27). It tells of Wayne's heartbreaking origin story from the loss of his parents to his travels and to his transformation into a dangerous combatant (Goyer; Van de Water 18, 63). Much of the film centers on his return to the city of Gotham and his struggle to defend it from villains (Goyer).

The Monomyth

Now that the history of Iron Man, Spider-Man, and Batman has been discussed, it is time to explain the monomyth. Many people find mythology intriguing, but Joseph Campbell seems to have possessed a passion for it. I assert this claim, because he did not simply enjoy the stories, he analyzed them (Thigpen 4; Kalliokoski 13; Rickett). Campbell researched diverse tales from

across cultures and used their similarities to determine a pattern that great stories seemed to follow (1; Thigpen 4; Rickett; Kalliokoski 13). He christened this pattern the monomyth (1; Thigpen 4; Rickett;). Though the monomyth is not the only story pattern in existence, it is perhaps one of the most famous. (More versions of story patterns are attributed to Dan Harmon, Kurt Vonnegut, and Christopher Vogler, among others) (Rickett). This "metanarrative of humanity," as Andrew Thigpen calls it, forms a central part of Campbell's 1949 work, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (4; Campbell 1). It could be argued that Campbell did not truly create the monomyth, but regardless, his book popularized it (Rickett).

The hero's journey, another moniker for the monomyth, portrays a protagonist who enters a new kind of realm, accomplishes his mission, and ventures home with power, knowledge, and probably treasure of some kind (Rickett; Kalliokoski 19, 13; Campbell 42, 48, 167). This monomyth theory consists of three larger sections of "separation, initiation, and return" (Kalliokoski 13; Campbell vii, viii). Moreover, it can be extended into seventeen smaller steps: "Call to Action," "Refusal of Call," "Supernatural Aid," "Crossing the Threshold," "Belly of the Whale," "The Road of Trials," "Meeting the Goddess," "Temptation," "Atonement with the Father," "Apotheosis," "The Ultimate Boon," "Refusal of Return," "Magic Flight," "Rescue from Without," "Crossing the Return Threshold," "Master of Two Worlds," and "Freedom to Live" (note: I used Rickett's titles, which are very similar, but not identical, to Campbell's) (Rickett; Kalliokoski 14; Campbell vii, viii). Interestingly, not all of these steps are necessary for a character to journey through the monomyth and many of them serve as alternatives to each other (Kalliokoski 17). For example, steps seven through ten can be seen as different options for the character to experience (Kalliokoski 17; Rickett).

How Iron Man, Spider-Man, and Batman Fit the Monomythic Steps

The story begins with the protagonist receiving his invitation to the journey that carries the whole plot. This step, the "Call to Action," starts the phase of separation (Rickett; Kalliokoski 14). It is closely linked with the second step, "Refusal of the Call" (Kalliokoski 15; Rickett). Here, the protagonist wastes the glorious opportunity that has been gifted to him and opts to remain where he is, versus abandoning his homebound responsibilities and venturing on a risky journey (Rickett; Kalliokoski 15). Given enough time and pressure, however, the hero rethinks his stance and takes up the quest (Rickett). Stark experiences the first step in *Iron Man*, when a reporter known as Christine Everhart challenges the morality of his position as a weapons seller (Kalliokoski 35; Fergus). Stark then quickly chooses the second step as he treats Everhart with disrespect, rejects his invitation to adventure, and chooses to remain living his current lifestyle (Kalliokoski 35, 36).

For Parker, his "Call to Action" comes a bit farther into his story (Rickett; Van de Water 34, 35). Before it comes, he acquires superpowers through the bite of a genetically enhanced spider (Van de Water 31). He then uses his abilities to embarrass and mildly injure Flash Thompson, a school bully (Van de Water 34; Koepp). The call comes later as Parker's Uncle Ben tries to help him understand the importance of responsibility (Van de Water 34; Koepp). He tells his nephew, "with great power comes great responsibility," which functions as a catch phrase for the film (Van de Water 34, 85; Koepp). Tragically, Parker ignores the advice and, in a parallel to Stark, disrespects the herald character, Uncle Ben (Van de Water 34, 35; Kalliokoski 35). In this scene, Parker is offered his "Call to Action" and refuses, fulfilling the first two steps of the monomyth.

There are a few possibilities for Wayne's "Call to Action" in *Batman Begins.* First, Wayne is imprisoned early on in the story in a foreign nation. After being relocated to solitary

confinement (because he was a danger to the other prisoners, who fought him), Wayne is visited

by a character known as Ra's al Ghul and offered the opportunity to join an organization known

as the League of Shadows (Goyer; Van de Water 63). When Wayne chooses to venture on the

quest which leads him to the League, it also, eventually, leads him to become the defender of

Gotham (Goyer; Van de Water 63).

However, if Wayne's primary goal in this story is to wage war against the criminals who

oppress his home city, then I believe his "Call to Action" could be the double-homicide of his

parents. Joe Chill, a poverty-stricken thief turned murderer, attempts to steal from the Wayne

family after they exit a theater (Goyer; Van de Water 27, 28). When the robbery grows

complicated, Chill seems to panic and shoots the Wayne parents (Goyer; Van de Water 28). This

tragedy highlights Gotham's depravity and need for help. It serves as young Wayne's first step in

the monomyth and leads him to become a nightmare for villains in his older years. In this case,

Wayne's "Refusal of the Call" could come roughly twelve years later, when he plans to murder

Chill on the day he is released from incarceration. (Wayne is saved from his revenge when Chill

is killed by another person before Wayne can shoot him). In this case, I assert that Wayne's

"Refusal" is his choice to seek revenge instead of battling the crime in Gotham in a more heroic

manner. Alternatively, I propose that Wayne could be viewed as answering the call belatedly, as

an adult, instead of refusing it (Goyer).

The third step of the monomyth, "Supernatural Aid," comes when the protagonist

receives help from other characters to achieve the journey's goal (Rickett). Campbell wrote that,

"What such a figure represents is the benign, protecting power of destiny" (59). This powerful

help could come from one specific character who serves as a guardian and counselor for the

protagonist who accepts his invitation to adventure (Kalliokoski 15). However, for the hero who

rejects his invitation to adventure, the guardian character will likely function as the one who plucks him from his current situation and sets him on his journey (Kalliokoski 16). It is also worth mentioning that this character is sometimes literally supernatural or beyond human, such as Campbell's example of "the old woman" in an East African story, who possessed superhuman power (57). At other times, however, it is merely a, relatively, ordinary member of humanity who functions as the "Supernatural Aid" to the protagonist, such as in most of the next few examples.

In *Iron Man*, the role of "Supernatural Aid" to Stark is filled by two different characters: James Rhodes and Doctor Ho Yinsen (Kalliokoski 36, 33). Rhodes, Stark's friend, offers him assistance throughout the film, as well as prodding him to be a moral character (Kalliokoski 37, 36; Fergus). Stark meets the second "Supernatural Aid" character in a prison camp, where they are both captive by terrorists (Fergus; Kalliokoski 33, 34). Yinsen also directs Stark towards responsibility. Eleonoora Kalliokoski provides one of Yinsen's quotes from the movie which exemplifies this,

> Look, what you just saw – that is your legacy, Stark. Your life's work in the hands of those murderers. Is that how you want to go out? Is this the last act of defiance of the great Tony Stark? Or are you going to do something about it? (36; Fergus).

Yinsen challenges Stark's worldview and incites him to combat his enemies and, eventually, to fight for the good of others (Kalliokoski 36; Fergus). Thus, Yinsen both counsels Stark and propels him on his adventure, serving as supernatural aid.

In *Iron Man*, *Spider-Man*, and *Batman Begins*, those who function as "Supernatural Aid" characters are nearly all human, but when we come upon Parker's tale there exists a possible

exception (Kalliokoski 36, 33; Koepp; Van de Water 30, 31, 81; Goyer). Interestingly, Wesley Colin Van de Water suggests that Parker's "Supernatural Aid" in *Spider-Man* came from the enhanced arachnid which bit him (31, 32). Instead of being a "guardian and counselor" the spider merely serves as the conduit for the special abilities which thrust Parker into the superhero's journey. In this case, the superpowers are the help (Kalliokoski 15).

Although, if the guardian character in this story is the one who forces Parker to abandon the status quo and take up his adventure, then the role of "Supernatural Aid" could be played by either Uncle Ben or the criminal who killed him (Kalliokoski 16; Koepp; Van de Water 26). Similar to Wayne, Parker's relative is murdered by an armed thief (Van de Water 26). This scene serves a crucial role in Parker's transformation from using his abilities for petty and selfish purposes to using them for the good of others (Koepp; Van de Water 36).

Similar to *Iron Man*, *Batman Begins* portrays two contrasting characters which could serve as the "Supernatural Aid" for the protagonist: al Ghul and Alfred Pennyworth (Van de Water 18, 29, 30, 81). The first man trains Wayne to be a skilled warrior, helping him become the vigilante who will watch over Gotham (Van de Water 29, 30; Nolan). Pennyworth, the second character, is Wayne's butler, who also functions as his father figure (Van de Water 81; Goyer). In addition to essentially raising Wayne for much of his youth, Pennyworth provides him with wisdom and advice during the story (Van de Water 81; Goyer). He also cares for him when he is poisoned by a fear serum and comes to his rescue when he is trapped in a burning mansion (Goyer). Arguably, Rachel Dawes could also be considered a "Supernatural Aid" to Wayne, because she helped push him forward on his adventure after his "Refusal of the Call." She slaps him and berates him after learning that he had schemed to shoot Chill (Goyer; Van de Water 63).

The fourth step is "Crossing the Threshold," where the protagonist enters a new place (Rickett; Campbell 64). There exists "…darkness, the unknown, and danger…," as Campbell puts it in *A Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Rickett; 64). However, the hero will first have to pass a threatening figure which guards the threshold (Kalliokoski 16; Campbell 64). In *Iron Man*, the cave that Stark wakes up in, as well as the surrounding area, is a new place thick with peril (Fergus). I propose that Stark may cross his threshold when he awakes to captivity. Moreover, the terrorists who imprison him function as murderous threshold guardians (Kalliokoski 36). However, if the view is taken that he must pass the threshold guardians to enter the new place of danger, then I propose that the desert could also function as that perilous area (Fergus).

For Parker, choosing to battle crime on the streets of New York is his threshold. As an untrained high school student, the act of fighting against gunmen is new territory for him (Koepp). Furthermore, the miscreants he faces could be seen as threshold guardians. Particularly, his uncle's killer could be the most notable threshold guardian (Koepp).

Wayne ventures to a strange place of danger in *Batman Begins* when he visits the base of the League of Shadows, where he meets al Ghul. He fights against a warrior before training with the league, so I propose that this opponent could also function as a threshold guardian (Goyer). Moreover, I assert that fighting criminals in his home city, like Parker, could also be crossing a threshold of sorts, because it was a more particular, and newer, danger (Goyer).

Next, the protagonist comes upon peril in the fifth step, the "Belly of the Whale." If he chooses to press on then the character effectively chooses transformation. He will not remain the person he was as he ventures towards his goal (Rickett). To Campbell, this step is associated with the hero's "self-annihilation" (Kalliokoski 16). This step can be seen in Iron Man, while Stark and Yinsen are still imprisoned by the terrorists. Yinsen helps Stark to construct the first

Iron Man suit, which he uses to defeat their enemies (Kalliokoski 36, 37). Kalliokoski suggests

that this suit also functions as the "Belly of the Whale" (37). At one point in the film, Stark is

essentially defenseless as he waits, trapped and unable to move in the suit while it powers up

(Kalliokoski 36, 37). This scene is intensified by the threat of the guards and Yinsen's decision

to sacrifice himself to afford Stark more time (Kalliokoski 36, 37; Koepp). Kalliokoski writes,

> This armor…functions as the Belly of the Whale, marking his symbolic rebirth:
>
> this experience, and the battle he overcomes while in it, have irrevocably removed
>
> him from the attitudes and circumstances he was trapped in earlier (36, 37).

I assume the death of Yinsen also catapults Stark's yearning for a new path, one of responsibility

and heroism (Fergus).

Rickett considers the "Belly of the Whale" to be the "first point of real danger in the

hero's journey." This is difficult to place in movies such as *Spider-Man* and *Batman Begins*

where danger is prevalent. Perhaps Parker faces this peril when he contends with a pro wrestler

in a cage fight, trying to win money (Koepp; Van de Water 35). Here, he is trapped in a

dangerous situation as a consequence of his decisions. The webslinger could also experience the

monomythic fifth step when he battles his uncle's murderer (Koepp). Or Spider-Man's "Belly of

the Whale" phase could come when he chooses personal risk to defend the citizens of New York

against criminals (Koepp). While this last option would not be Parker's first encounter with

danger, it does signal his transformation into a hero.

Similarly, *Batman Begins* offers a plethora of perilous moments for Wayne, including the

one in his childhood where Chill takes his parents' lives (Goyer; Van de Water 27, 28). Wayne's

"Belly of the Whale" moment could be when he strides towards Chill and prepares to shoot him,

twelve years after the Wayne parents' double homicide (Goyer). Or it could be when he first

journeys to the League of Shadows and fights against one of the assassins (Goyer; Van de Water 29).

Perhaps, better than both of these theories, is an earlier section of the film which shows Wayne being held captive in a foreign country, similar to Stark's imprisonment by terrorists. There he is targeted by other prisoners (possibly, because of his skill in combat) and battles them. He wins, despite being outnumbered (Goyer). The prison fight shown in the movie could easily serve as "the first point of real danger in the hero's journey" (Rickett). Furthermore, the following section, mentioned above, is where al Ghul gives Wayne the life-altering proposal to venture on the "path" that he's offering; one that Wayne, eventually, accepts (Goyer). That decision will take him upon a journey which will forge his heroism, fulfilling another aspect of the fifth monomythic step.

Alternatively, the scene in the movie when Wayne comes to the finale of his training with the League displays his character change. He is ordered to kill a murderer and he refuses with the words, "No. I'm no executioner." His mentor replies, "Your compassion is a weakness your enemies will not share." At this point Wayne states, "That's why it's so important. It separates us from them." As the argument continues, it becomes apparent that the League is a threat to Gotham. Snagged in a hazardous situation, Wayne takes action. He rescues the man he was commanded to kill and flees from the League, destroying their base in the process. Regardless of the fallout from his choices (at least one League member is killed and another becomes a lethal nemesis), I believe this scene demonstrates that Wayne values courage, compassion, and justice (in contrast to unbridled revenge) (Goyer). And so, Wayne fulfills the fifth step of the monomyth.

The following step begins the next triadic section of the monomyth, known as "Initiation," which encompasses steps six through eleven (Kalliokoski 13, 16, 17; Rickett). Here, the protagonist passes through, "The Road of Trials." He utilizes his assets and receives aid from his allies as he endures the challenges of this section, which Rickett refers to as "tests." Furthermore, victory often escapes the protagonist in one or more of these difficult situations, which can appear as a triad of trouble (Rickett). However, the hero may receive help from other characters during his "Trials" (Kalliokoski 17).

After escaping the terrorists, it could be said that Stark begins the "Road of Trials" in *Iron Man* by suffering in the desert (Kalliokoski 34, 37). To conquer this challenge, he must stay alive (Kalliokoski 37). In this case, his persistence is a significant asset (Fergus). He also receives help from Rhodes and the other characters who helicopter into the desert and save him (Kalliokoski 37; Fergus). Stark's failure in trials can be seen in other scenes such as when he struggles to build a modified suit and learn to control it (Fergus).

Parker's "Road of Trials" can be seen when he defends innocent citizens from the turmoil of the villainous Green Goblin and other wrongdoers (Koepp; Koh 741). However, as Rickett mentions, receiving aid from allies is another facet of step six and this particular Spider-Man movie seems to lack consistent support characters for Parker as a superhero (Koepp). In contrast to *Spider-Man: Homecoming*, where the title character effectively has a mentor (Iron Man, actually) and a sidekick, the "friendly neighborhood Spider-Man" of Koepp's 2002 film mainly combats crime alone (Goldstein; Koepp).

Regardless of this, the hero does sometimes receive help from others who do not know his full identity as Peter Parker/Spider-Man (Koepp). Particularly, a scene later in the story shows the protagonist struggling to save both his love interest and a group of children while

suffering the attacks of the Green Goblin. When the madman prepares to kill Spider-Man, the hero is recued by a group of New Yorkers who hurtle objects at the villain. One of them yells, "You mess with Spidey, you mess with New York!" Another tells the Green Goblin, "You mess with one of us, you mess with all of us!" With the people's aid, Spider-Man manages to accomplish the rescue mission (Koepp; Koh 744). However, he fails to escape or defeat the Green Goblin at that particular moment (Koepp). Furthermore, this step could stretch to encompass earlier trials in the film, such as when Spider-Man fails to stop the Green Goblin when the villain interrupts a parade (Koepp).

Van de Water shows that Wayne's "Road of Trials" is when he encounters the League of Shadows and starts to become the man who will defend Gotham's streets as a legendary hero (29, 63; Goyer). Moreover, Wayne perseveres through rigorous training, which I assert could serve as paradigms for trials (Van de Water 29; Nolan). Additionally, al Ghul appears as an ally and mentor to Wayne at this point in the movie (Goyer; Van de Water 29). Wayne also fails to succeed in all of his matches against al Ghul. One scene shows him plunge into freezing water after he loses a combat match (Goyer).

The next four steps of the monomyth are: "Meeting with the Goddess," "Temptation, Atonement with the Father," and "Apotheosis" (Rickett; Kalliokoski 17). Interestingly, these steps, seven through ten, are not all prevalent in each monomyth story and, rather, seem to provide various ways in which the protagonist can achieve victory (Kalliokoski 17; Rickett). Since they serve as different routes to step eleven, it is unnecessary to explore all of them in detail. As such, step nine will be focused on more extensively, while eight and ten are merely touched on (Kalliokoski 17; Rickett).

First, the seventh step is known as "Meeting the Goddess" (Rickett). Kalliokoski wrote that, "According to Campbell, the Goddess is present in every woman" (18). Interestingly, from Rickett's view this character does not automatically need to be female. She is defined by her position as one who offers the protagonist wise counsel which aids him in the journey to come (Rickett). Both Everhart and Pepper could serve this purpose in *Iron Man* (Kalliokoski 37, 38). For example, the first woman informs Stark about how his company's weapons are being used by terrorists (Kalliokoski 37; Fergus). The protagonist then discovers that his business partner, Stane, was involved in supplying the criminals with weapons (Fergus).

Dawes, Wayne's significant other, functions as the goddess in *Batman Begins,* since she challenges the protagonist to actually be heroic (Goyer; Van de Water 63). In Spider-Man, however, there is some difficulty in pinpointing the goddess character. I believe that she is likely played by Mary Jane Watson, Parker's love interest (Koepp; Koh 740; Van de Water 68). But this casting of Watson as the goddess is complicated by her seeming lack of advice. If wise counsel is the only criterion for this role, then I suggest that Uncle Ben is the obvious option, strange as it is (Koepp).

Step eight, "Temptation" is somewhat self-explanatory. The protagonist faces further tests, where he can either give in to the temptations or refuse to succumb. Rickett says that "These temptations pick and pull at the insecurities of the Hero" (Rickett). The protagonist is offered the chance to abandon the adventure, but chooses to continue on (Rickett). I propose that any superhero is offered the temptation to quit, but Stark, Parker, and Wayne fight on (Fergus; Koepp; Goyer). Also, it is worth noting that Campbell labeled this section "Woman as Temptress" (101).

In "Atonement with the Father" the hero comes to one of the most heartbreaking stages of his adventure. In fact, Rickett describes this step as "…the emotional climax of the story." The protagonist must recognize a flawed part of his nature, one which threatens to endanger the mission. The poor character also contends with a defective father figure (Kalliokoski 18). Interestingly, Rickett mentions that this part of the story often involves a male being, but not necessarily. Kalliokoski wrote that,

> According to Campbell, this ordeal is a matter of finding belief that the monstrous
>
> figure of the father is merciful, or else finding protection from the mother figure.
>
> Either way the ultimate outcome is finding favor with the father… (18).

This scene will help the protagonist gain an improved perspective as well as showcase his transformation to a hero better suited to achieve victory (Rickett).

Sadly, Stark, Parker, and Wayne all share an unfortunate commonality in their respective films. To begin with, in *Iron Man*, Obadiah Stane serves as a father figure, an apparent mentor, and a traitorous enemy to Stark (Kalliokoski 38). He appears as an ally for much of the film, before his true villainy is unveiled. He also provides Stark with counsel and encouragement. Despite this, he attempts Stark's murder twice. First, he orders the terrorists to kidnap and kill Stark. Second, he attempts homicide by taking Stark's arc reactor, which keeps the protagonist alive for much of the movie (he does not need it to survive for the entire story). Eventually, Stark and Pepper, his significant other, overcome Stane (Kalliokoski 28, 38; Fergus). In this case, Stark, with help, conquers the self-serving paternal figure who betrayed him and endangered the lives of others (Fergus).

When it comes to *Spider-Man*, Wilson Koh asserts that Parker experiences step nine of the monomyth after Uncle Ben dies. Parker dwells on his uncle's wisdom while searching for

ideas concerning his Spider-Man suit. He goes on to utilize his powers to protect a variety of people from those who would hurt them (Koh 742). In short, though Parker disregarded his uncle's caring advice when he was alive, he imitates his father figure after his death. Parker performs a kind of atonement in trying to live a life that his uncle would be proud of (Koh 743).

However, this theory would place Parker at his monomythic step nine before the step one which was discussed above. Moreover, Uncle Ben is far from being a "monstrous" father figure (Kalliokoski 18; Koepp; Koh 743; Van de Water 85). An alternative idea involves Norman Osborne, who serves as both Parker's greed-driven enemy as well as a flawed father figure to him, in comparison to Uncle Ben as a good-natured role model (Koh 743). In the climax of the story, Parker struggles to survive an onslaught from Osborne, also known as the Green Goblin. Their battle results in Osborne accidently causing his own death. Even though Parker does not truly defeat him, so much as the Goblin defeats himself, the villain remains conquered while the hero lives (Koepp). This scene could be considered the "Atonement with the Father" section of Spider-Man.

Similarly, the climax of *Batman Begins* displays the defender of Gotham against al Ghul, the man who trained him, taught him, and betrayed him (Nolan; Van de Water 29, 30). Furthermore, he misled Wayne concerning his identity, operating under the name Ducard for a considerable portion of the story (Nolan; Van de Water 29). Towards the end of the movie Batman and al Ghul are in a train which speeds towards destruction. Wayne escapes and the antagonist perishes (Goyer). Thus, this section of the story could function as step nine of Batman's monomyth.

Tragically, a consistent variable throughout these three stories is a paternal figure turned villain. Certainly, the scenes discussed for this section are traumatic by nature. Moreover, they

portray the protagonists as heroes by their victory. The main characters' perspectives are likely altered as well. In all these ways, these movies encompass the ninth step of the monomyth. However, Kalliokoski's explanation of step nine, "Atonement with the Father," highlights a complex factor in the monomyth (18; Rickett). She writes,

> …Campbell presents a father figure as another trial to be overcome on the hero's journey, the Atonement with the Father….According to Campbell, this ordeal is a matter of finding belief that the monstrous figure of the father is merciful, or else finding protection from the mother figure. Either way, the ultimate outcome is finding favor with the father, becoming one with him (Kalliokoski 18).

I recognize that this notion can appear convoluted and outlandish at first. To begin with, it provides two strange alternatives for the hero to pass through this stage of the story. The first seems to involve the protagonist discovering that his enemy is "merciful" (Kalliokoski 18). It is evident that Stark's, Parker's, and Wayne's wicked paternal figures are unforgiving and murderous.

The second option requires a "mother figure" who helps the hero (Kalliokoski 18). At this point, the monomyth takes a bizarre twist. A "goddess" character is often found in monomyth stories, as was touched on in "Meeting with the Goddess" (Kalliokoski 18). Moreover, this goddess character possesses motherly attributes (Kalliokoski 18). This factor proves confusing since the role of the goddess and the role of love interest can be played by the same character. However, these characters can still offer aid to the heroes. For example, Pepper and Stark partner to defeat Stane (Kalliokoski 38). Thus, in this way, Iron Man is aided by the maternal figure and further fulfills Campbell's "Atonement with the Father" (Kalliokoski 18, 38; Fergus)

In contrast, Wayne receives help from Officer Gordon in saving Gotham. Interestingly, Rickett communicated that the goddess character does not automatically need to be a woman. The importance of the character is in how he or she helps the protagonist. Or, as Rickett says of the helper, "whoever it is our hero will gain something from the wisdom they impart." Taking this perspective, Gordon could fulfill the role of goddess. However, for someone who views femininity as a necessary part of the goddess character, then Dawes is the only true option for serving that purpose in *Batman Begins*. Despite this, she is absent from the climax. However, Dawes does help with Gordon's inoculation earlier in the story, without which, he would have been poisoned by the villains and unable to help Wayne save the city. In this way, Dawes plays an important part in Wayne's victory. Thus, *Batman Begins* fits the ninth step of the monomyth (Goyer).

Spider-Man differs somewhat from *Batman Begins* and certainly from *Iron Man* at this point. Parker survives the Goblin's climactic assault without physical aid from others. Although, it is after the Goblin threatens Watson that Parker gathers renewed strength for the battle (Koepp). If the Goblin did not mentioned Watson, or if Parker had not loved her, then Spider-Man may have lacked the will to fight and perished soon after. In this way, Watson, the goddess character of the *Spider-Man* story, aids the hero in his victory. Thus, in a way, Spider-Man fulfills step nine of the monomyth.

Next, "Apotheosis" serves as step ten, which Rickett describes as "…the stage of the Hero's Journey where a greater perspective is achieved." The protagonist also chooses heroism over cowardice (Kalliokoski 18, 19). It could also be the protagonist discovering a piece of information (Rickett). Multiple scenes in each of the three movies show the protagonists denying

cowardice and embracing heroism. Moreover, I believe that their altered perspectives are clearly seen by the end of the movies (Fergus; Koepp; Goyer).

At last, the monomythic hero will reach step eleven, "The Ultimate Boon," which Rickett refers to as "…the physical climax of the story…" Here the protagonist finally achieves his goal. The world is saved (Rickett). The hero's nemesis is wearing handcuffs in an interrogation cell. The guy gets the girl. Whatever the goal of the story was, it has now been achieved. Moreover, Kalliokoski reminds us that the hero receives something of value (19). This step is fulfilled similarly in all three movies, primarily because they share the superhero genre. Stark, Parker, and Wayne experience the eleventh step of the monomyth when their villains are defeated (Fergus; Koepp; Goyer). The heroes' victories, and the consequent relief that each feels, can serve as their prizes.

None of steps twelve through fourteen are entirely necessary, but they serve as different plot points which the protagonist could live through. He does not need to live through them all (Kalliokoski 20). Campbell titled this third act of the monomyth, "Return" (Rickett; Kalliokoski 19). It is worth noting here that, as a wise person pointed out to me, though superhero stories end in a sense, they are generally ongoing adventures (Veach). Therefore, the films each offer closure to the audiences, but the storylines function so as to accommodate sequels. Of course, before one moves on to a sequel, I suggest that it is beneficial to finish the first story, and so, the "Return" section of the monomyth starts with step twelve, "Refusal of Return" (Rickett; Kalliokoski 19). The protagonist is a new person, so to speak, and has accomplished the goal of his adventure (Rickett). He can now venture home and be generous with his prize by helping others. I think the prize in *Iron Man*, *Spider-Man*, and *Batman Begins* could be interpreted as the villain's defeat. The heroes can return home with the assurance that their respective antagonists

can no longer cause harm to their cities, love interests, and random people who need saving. And really, is that not a gift to everyone?

It is worth noting, however, that a hero may desire to stay in the world of adventure and this is known as the twelfth step, "Refusal to Return" (Kalliokoski 20; Rickett). Instead of this "Refusal," the protagonist may encounter the thirteenth step, "Magic Flight," where he must venture home, surviving the trip. He will likely receive help at this point from characters previously introduced (Rickett). This step is often for the more deceptive of protagonists, who flee those whom they stole a prize from (Kalliokoski 20). He could also experience step fourteen, "Rescue from Without." Here the protagonist receives help in his escape (Rickett). Or as Campbell writes, "…the world may have to come and get him" (178). This step comes into play when the protagonist either does not want to return home, or else is unable to do so by himself (Kalliokoski 21).

"Crossing the Return Threshold" is step fifteen. Here, the protagonist returns to his home, or wherever he began, probably struggling with the change. This section should highlight the protagonist's transformation into a more heroic character (Rickett). Kalliokoski presents the press conference scene towards the end of Iron Man as Stark's step fifteen. By this point, he has achieved his story goal (Kalliokoski 38). Moreover, Stark admits, "I am Iron Man" (Fergus). This could point to the fact that, though still a flawed character, he has shifted from an egomaniac to a superhero who cares for others.

In the case of Peter Parker, "Crossing the Return Threshold" seems vaguer. For him, the fifteenth step may be more than one scene, encompassing the majority of the ending of the movie after the villain perishes. Parker deals with the fallout of the Green Goblin's demise, particularly because the villain's alter ego, Osborne, was Parker's best friend's father. The end of the movie

also showcases Parker being Spider-Man, which points to his growth in integrity and heroism (Koepp).

At the end of *Batman Begins*, Dawes, Wayne's friend/love interest, finds him at the ruins of Wayne Manor, his home. During their discussion Wayne admits, "I was a coward with a gun…" alluding to his murderous plans concerning Chill earlier in the movie. He goes on to say that "…justice is about more than revenge…" (Goyer). This scene demonstrates Wayne's character growth and how he was able to let go of his personal vendetta.

Step fifteen is closely followed by sixteen, "Master of Two Worlds." By this point, the protagonist has ventured on a dangerous quest, grown as a character, and returned home with the wisdom he acquired during his journey. He survived the perilous world of adventure and now lives in the world of his home. Or, as Rickett stated: "The hero survived an adventure in the chaos realm, and now survives in the normal order realm." In this way, he has earned the title of "Master of Two Worlds." Moreover, many of the problems the protagonist suffered before the adventure seem trivial in comparison to the jeopardy he endured on his quest (Rickett). For example, school bullies lose their terror when compared to a supervillain (Koepp).

At the end of Stark's movie, he reveals his identity as Iron Man (Kalliokoski 39; Koh 743, 744). By publicly joining his secret identity with that of his technology maven persona, Stark becomes a "Master of the Two Worlds," which brings us to the end of his monomyth (Kalliokoski 39; Fergus). Interestingly, both Parker and Wayne declare their secret identities at the end of their respective films as well (Koh 743; Koepp; Goyer). In contrast, though, they speak in a context which allows them to retain the secrecy of their masked alter egos (Koepp; Nolan). Kalliokoski wrote that, "these heroes reach the freedom to traverse between the two

worlds at will…" (21). Stark, Parker, and Wayne all become "Master[s] of Two Worlds" in the sense that they can live as their ordinary selves and as superheroes by choice.

At last, the protagonist comes to the seventeenth step, "Freedom to Live." In *A Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Campbell asks, "What, now, is the result of the miraculous passage and return?" (205). The hero has persevered through a hazardous adventure and what is to come of it? In the words of Rickett, "In many ways the hero's journey is about death and rebirth. The story may manifest as the death of an aspect of character, and the birth of some new way of life." Tony Stark discovers what it is like to protect others as a defender in shining metal (Fergus). Peter Parker learns to use his "great power" with "great responsibility" (Koepp; Van de water 34, 85). And Bruce Wayne finds a way to seek justice for his city (Goyer). These characters discover a new way to live and, therefore, fulfill the last step of the monomyth.

Contrast

While all three heroes can fit the basic monomyth steps, some of them fit the steps better. Spider-Man appears to be the outlier in a few different ways. For example, the third step in his hero's journey is stranger than the "Supernatural Aid" sections in the other two superheroes' stories. As mentioned above, Peter receives help, in the form of superpowers, from the arachnid which bites him (Van de Water 31). However, this spider is neither a guardian and counselor nor is it the one who causes Peter to journey through the monomyth after the "Refusal of the Call" (Kalliokoski 15, 16; Koepp; Van de Water 26). It is not even human, in contrast to: Rhodes, Yinsen, al Ghul, and Pennyworth (Koepp; Kalliokoski 36; Fergus; Goyer; Van de Water 18, 29, 30, 81;). Uncle Ben could also be considered Peter's "Supernatural Aid" (Koepp; Van de Water 26). He functioned as a guardian, counselor, and instigator for Spider-Man's mission (Koepp;

Van de Water 26; 34; Koh 742, 743). Despite this, he offers little help throughout the movie, except for his advice and example, mainly because he spent much of the film deceased (Koepp).

Additionally, it proves awkward to match the plot of *Spider-Man* with the monomyth's "Meeting the Goddess." This seventh step involves a wise character who counsels the hero (Rickett). At this point, Uncle Ben fits the role perfectly (Koepp). However, the character is often female; something Peter's uncle is not (Kalliokoski 18). So, while this step could technically be met in *Spider-Man*, it is met in an aberrant fashion. *Iron Man* and *Batman Begins*, in contrast, present Everhart, Pepper, and Dawes, who fit the role of goddess more comfortably (Kalliokoski 37, 38; Goyer; Van de Water 63).

Furthermore, *Spider-Man's* "Atonement with the Father" seems to fit Campbell's pattern less satisfactorily than *Iron Man* and *Batman Begins* did. First, as mentioned above, Rickett considers this step "…the emotional climax of the story." I believe that Koh's theory that Parker experiences this step after his uncle's demise while he searches images to help him design his superhero costume fails to meet this criterion (742; Koepp). Additionally, Parker's alternative step nine, discussed above, remains problematic in that he does not receive physical help from the goddess character in the climax of the story. Though, Watson does indirectly assist him since he is more motivated to fight after the Goblin threatens her (Koepp). And so, Spider-Man can fulfill the "Atonement with the Father" -but not as clearly as his crime-fighting peers.

Additionally, *Spider-Man's* "Crossing the Return Threshold" remains less defined than the fifteenth step of the other movies. As touched on earlier, the film lacks one particular scene where Parker's hero transformation is showcased as he returns to his starting point (Koepp; Rickett). In summation, though Spider-Man effectively fits the monomyth overall, he does not match up with the seventeen steps as well as the two richer, gadget-laden superheroes.

Successful Stories

It is now a point of interest to wonder whether these stories are successful. Van de Water proposed that Batman, Spiderman, and other such heroic characters (I add Iron Man to this list) serve as reminders that goodness remains in this chaotic world. In Van de Water's words, "They serve as exemplars of the difference one person can make in the world, as well as the embodiment of virtues such as: honor, duty, sacrifice, love, loyalty, and service" (6,7). Additionally, Rickett considered the protagonists of monomyths to be paradigms for us, "…that we can traverse the constant change of existence, face our mortality, and continue." Regardless of this, I propose that heroes who persist through the adventure of a monomyth, and especially superheroes, inspire us through their perseverance and remind us of hope. Furthermore, these characters can remind us that, if we let it, a challenge can serve as our own "Call to Adventure." And who knows what victory we might achieve? And so, these monomythic superheroes are successful as instruments of inspiration among audiences.

The End…

In conclusion, we have discussed *Iron Man*, *Spider-Man*, and *Batman Begins*, as well as how their protagonists fit the monomyth theory. This holds significance because it shows how successful stories (these three and likely many others) fit a particular pattern -the monomyth. Knowing this, authors could implement what they learn from the paper to form more engaging stories, allowing the monomyth to influence and improve their work. Also, recognizing structure in stories can help one see more beauty in them. Thus, audiences can use what they learn from this paper to understand, appreciate, and enjoy stories on another level.

Moreover, the monomyth is influential in our digital culture. With television, movies, eBooks and the like, technology facilitates people's access to numerous and diverse stories. In

Campbell's renowned book, he discusses how people can encounter stories from different origins and how they,

> …will always be the one, shape-shifting yet marvelously constant story that we
> find, together with a challengingly persistent suggestion of more remaining to be
> experienced than will ever be known or told (1).

Assuming Campbell's view of the prevalence of the hero's journey in stories, then the monomyth is able to influence a massive amount of people. Furthermore, a monomythic story may be better suited to reach and impact numerous people from various ways of life. Specifically, in collaboration with a wise tutor that I know, I agree with the idea that people in the digital age are inclined to want quick service and the monomyth helps allow quick variations of the same basic story. The familiar pattern may allow people to understand and connect with a story faster than with a tale which lacks that structure (Matos). In summation, the monomyth is common in this digital age and well-suited to connect with the people of this technological culture.

And so, it has been shown that Iron Man, Spider-Man, and Batman fit the monomyth. Do these stories match the theory perfectly for every step? The answer would be no. However, do they fit the theory on the whole? Yes. Rickett wrote that:

> Campbell…realized as an anthropologist, that every culture all around the globe
> had the same story beats in all their myths. Sure, some myths, and some movies,
> use 10 of the 17, or even just 5. But throughout human history, around the world,
> these story beats keep showing up.

I propose that a story does not need to perfectly match each of the seventeen steps of the monomyth theory to be a monomythic story. The Iron Man, Spider-Man, and Batman

characters do fit the monomyth, because their plots match up with many, if not all, of the

steps. Their connection to the monomyth is likely linked with their success.

Works Cited

"All Time Worldwide Box Office Grosses." *Box Office Mojo*. IMDb, website updated Mar. 4,

    2019. https://www.boxofficemojo.com/alltime/world/. *Box Office Mojo*, updated Mar. 4,

    2019, www.boxofficemojo.com/, Accessed Mar. 2019.

"Batman Movies at the Box Office." *Box Office Mojo*. IMDb, website updated Mar. 4, 2019.

    https://www.boxofficemojo.com/franchises/chart/?id=batman.htm. *Box Office Mojo*,

    updated Mar. 4, 2019, www.boxofficemojo.com/, Accessed Mar. 2019.

Campbell, Joseph. *A Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Edited by Robert Walter and David Kudler,

    New World Library, 2008.

Fergus, Mark, et al. *Iron Man*. Directed by Jon Favreau, performance by Robert Downey Jr.,

    Marvel Studios, 2 May 2008.

Gavaler, Chris. *Superhero Comics*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, an imprint of Bloomsbury

    Publishing Plc, 2018., 2018. *EBSCOhost*,

    seu.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat0

    6871a&AN=ste.1000397778&site=eds-live&scope=site.

Gavaler, Chris. "The Superhero Monomyth?" *The Patron Saint of Superheroes*. Chris Gavaler.

    Sept. 5, 2016. thepatronsaintofsuperheroes.wordpress.com/about/.

Goyer, David. S. and Christopher Nolan. *Batman Begins*. Directed by Christopher Nolan,

    performance by Christian Bale. Warner Bros. Pictures, 15 June 2005.

Goldstein, Jonathan, et al. *Spider-Man: Homecoming.* Directed by Jon Watts, performance by

    Tom Holland., Marvel Studios, 7 July 2017.

Kalliokoski, E.(Eleonoora). *I Am Iron Man: Tony Stark as a Mythical and Modern Hero in*

    Marvel Cinematic Universe. 2013. EBSCOhost, www.ulib.iupui.edu/cgi-

bin/proxy.pl?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsndl&AN=e dsndl.oai.union.ndltd.org.oulo.fi.oai.oulu.fi.nbnfioulu-201305301390&site=eds-live.

Koepp, David. *Spider-Man*. Directed by Sam Raimi, performance by Toby Maguire. Columbia Pictures. 3 May 2002.

Koh, Wilson. (Oct. 2009). "Everything Old Is Good Again: Myth and Nostalgia in Spider-Man." *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, vol. 23, no. 5, pp. 735–747. *EBSCOhost*, Retrieved from doi:10.1080/10304310903154651.

Matos, Kristine. My Challenge IV Classical Conversations tutor, who also happens to be my mother…

Rickett, Matt. "Joseph Campbell's Hero's Journey: A Better Screenplay in 17 Steps." *StudioBinder*. April, 2018. StudioBinder Inc. https://www.studiobinder.com/blog/joseph-campbells-heros-journey/. Accessed Feb.-Mar. 2019. *StudioBinder,* StudioBinder Inc. 2015. https://www.studiobinder.com/press/. Accessed Feb.-Mar. 2019.

Robinson, Ashley Sufflé. (16 Jul. 2018). "We Are Iron Man: Tony Stark, Iron Man, and American Identity in the Marvel Cinematic Universe's Phase One Films." *The Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. 51, no. 4, pp. 824-844. *EBSCOhost*, retrieved from: https://onlinelibrary-wiley-com.seu.idm.oclc.org/doi/full/10.1111/jpcu.12703.

Sanford, Jonathan J. "Introduction." *Spider-Man and Philosophy: The Web of Inquiry*. Series edited by William Irwin. Vol. 23, Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2012, Pg. 2. ProQuest Ebook Central. https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.seu.idm.oclc.org/lib/seu/reader.action?docID=821722.

"Superhero Movies at the Box Office." *Box Office Mojo*. IMDb, website updated Mar. 4, 2019.

www.boxofficemojo.com/genres/chart/?id=superhero.htm. *Box Office Mojo*, updated

Mar. 4, 2019, www.boxofficemojo.com/, Accessed Jan.-Mar. 2019.

Thigpen, Andrew Ford. *Batman as Monomyth: Joseph Campbell, Robert Jewett, John Shelton*

Lawrence, Frank Miller, Grant Morrison, Scott Whedon, and the Hero's Journey to

Gotham. Apr. 1, 2017. *Masters theses*. 456.

digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1459&context=masters

Van de Water, Wesley Colin. *The Bat and the Spider: A Folkloristic Analysis of Comic Book*

Narratives. May 2016. Utah State University.

https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=5940&context=etd.

Veach, Dr. Grace. My professor gave me some notes, which I utilized in this paper.

Whedon, Joss, et al. *Justice League.* Directed by Zack Snyder, performances by Ben Affleck,

Gal Gadot, et al. Warner Bros Pictures, 17 November 2017.

*Note: The word 'Campbellian' was used by Wilson Koh in his article "Everything Old Is Good

Again: Myth and Nostalgia in Spider-Man." (pg. 742)