

WHATEVER IT TAKES: REDEMPTION, INDIVIDUALISM, ALTRUISM AND THE  
MARVEL CINEMATIC UNIVERSE

---

A Thesis

Presented to

the Faculty of the Caudill College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences

Morehead State University

---

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

---

by

Rianna Jeanine Robinson

December 14, 2020

Accepted by the faculty of the Caudill College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences,  
Morehead State University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts  
degree.

---

Dr. Nettie Brock  
Director of Thesis

Master's Committee: \_\_\_\_\_, Chair  
Dr. Nettie Brock

---

Dr. Ann Andoloro

---

Dr. Morgan Getchell

---

Date

WHATEVER IT TAKES: REDEMPTION, INDIVIDUALISM AND ALTRUISM IN THE  
MARVEL CINEMATIC UNIVERSE

Rianna Jeanine Robinson  
Morehead State University, 2020

Director of Thesis: \_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Nettie Brock

The purpose of this thesis is to describe how the concepts of altruism, individualism and redemption align with contemporary cultural values, and to explain how the portrayals of Steve Rogers (Captain America) and Tony Stark (Iron Man) exemplify those traits, through an ideological analysis of the ten films in the Marvel Cinematic Universe that feature Rogers and Stark. I analyzed the films for examples of Rogers and Stark exemplifying altruism, individualism and a need for redemption, and explain how those actions are linked to American cultural values. Using the works of Richard Reynolds (1972), Alex Romanogli and Gian

Pagnucci and Trip McCrossin (2018), I developed a set of standards by which to judge the characters' actions as I analyzed each film by watching it and noting actions that displayed each trait. What I discovered was that both characters start at opposite ends of the spectrum, with Rogers being a pure altruist and Stark being an individualist; however, as the events of the films occur, the characters change, and we see them moving closer together on the spectrum, with Rogers becoming more individualistic and Stark becoming more of an altruist. I conclude that a hero cannot be purely altruistic or a pure individualist; both traits are needed to make a person a good leader with effective judgment.

Accepted by: \_\_\_\_\_, Chair

Dr. Nettie Brock

\_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Ann Andoloro

\_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Morgan Getchell

Gilgamesh. Odysseus. King Arthur. Ever since people began telling stories, those stories have had heroes, who exhibited extraordinary strength, courage, and sacrifice. Heroes are a reflection of the traits, virtues and morals of the societies in which they were created. Other researchers have argued that heroes reflect our best visions of ourselves and exhibit a level of virtue we aspire to. In modern times, no heroes are more popular than those in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU). The first 22 films in the MCU, referred to as the Infinity Saga, introduce us to dozens of superheroes with a wide array of powers and abilities. *Avengers: Endgame* is the culmination of all of the films of the Infinity Saga, with all the heroes of the MCU uniting to fight the Mad Titan, Thanos, to prevent him from wiping out half of all life in the universe. The film also serves as the final chapter for two of the most influential characters in the MCU: Iron Man (Tony Stark) and Captain America (Steve Rogers). The two serve as de facto leaders of The Avengers, a group of superheroes tasked with protecting the Earth from threats both on-planet and from outer space.

Since the films of the MCU were produced in America, they reflect several dominant values of American culture. These values include: individualism, or the concept of favoring freedom of action for individuals over collective control; Altruism, defined as selfless concern for others; and redemption, or the idea of making up for past bad actions.

The films in the MCU are some of the most popular films of all time. Not counting for inflation, Marvel movies make up five of the top ten highest grossing films of all time, with *Black Panther*, *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, *The Avengers* and *Avengers: Infinity War* all making

the list (Clark and Lynch, 2019). The final film in the saga, *Avengers: Endgame*, is the highest grossing film in history, with an international box office total of nearly \$3 billion (Clark and Lynch, 2019). Because of their global popularity, it is important for us to analyze the messages these movies convey to audiences about America's core values in this time of global social and political division. The characters have been studied to some extent in the past (ex. Reynolds, 1972; Romagnoli and Pagnucci, 2013; Malloy, 2018; Altman, 2018). However, the research is incomplete because it does not evaluate all of the appearances of Rogers and Stark, so the research does not examine how the characters change by the conclusion of their story arcs. Looking cumulatively at the *Infinity Saga* offers the opportunity to see the full picture of how the events in the films have changed the characters and their values.

The goal of this thesis will be to describe how the concepts of altruism, individualism and redemption align with contemporary cultural values, and to explain how the portrayals of Rogers and Stark exemplify those traits, through a rhetorical analysis of the 10 films in the MCU that feature Rogers and Stark. I will analyze the films for examples of Rogers and Stark exemplifying altruism, individualism and a need for redemption, and will explain how those actions are linked to American cultural values. By doing so, I will demonstrate how American cultural values are a combination of older, post WWII ideals and more contemporary ideals, and how both older and newer values represent American values in the current day.

### Literature Review

Although superhero movies are based on comic books, which are by their very nature surreal and not rooted in reality, they can tell us much about what we value individually and as a society as a whole. Researchers have examined the similarities between superhero stories and

hero mythology, as well as the philosophic concepts displayed by different characters. There is much we can learn from superhero stories about the traits we look for in heroes, and how those particular traits represent dominant hegemonic values.

Superheroes, or heroes from any culture for that matter, represent that culture's best vision of itself (Indick, 2004). We identify with and relate to superheroes, because even though they can have near god-like powers, they are still human, with the same human frailties and vulnerabilities as everyone else (Indick, 2004). These are the core features of classical Greco-Roman heroes such as Hercules, Odysseus and Achilles. Modern American superheroes combine the characteristics of the Greco-Roman tradition with the moral lessons of Judeo-Christian heroes. The Greco-Roman model is still used to this day as a storytelling device, and it can be applied to the characters of the MCU, showing us that their stories are structured in the same way as other heroic tales throughout the ages (Indick, 2004).

In their essay, "Myths, Archetypes and Religions," Davies-Skofka and McConeghy (2017) state that superheroes "represent mankind's longing for a protector," and that they "outline the set of morals society aspires to but cannot achieve" (p. 151). This is relevant when we consider Rogers and Stark, in that they possess virtues that are unattainable to common people. In the case of Stark, his vast intelligence is admirable, but not achievable for the common person. Rogers has a strict moral code that he unfalteringly adheres to, even in circumstances where the average person would be motivated to compromise. Superheroes offer exaggerated stories of good and evil and are, as Pizzaro and Baumeister phrased described them, "moral tales on steroids" (2013).

Since the goal of this essay is to define actions of Rogers and Stark as altruistic, individualistic or redemptive, it is important to clearly explain and define those terms. Pizzaro and Baumeister (2013) state that altruism is innate and likely tied to two evolutionary mechanisms: the willingness to act for the benefit of others in our gene pool, called kin selection, and acting for the benefit of others when one believes they will be paid in kind, termed reciprocal altruism. In the contemporary sense, altruism is defined as selfless action for the benefit of others regardless of the personal toll. Individualism is defined as a belief system that favors freedom of action for individuals over state control. It is often viewed as the antithesis to collectivism, which gives greater agency to groups within society rather than individual people.

### Heroes Throughout Time

Various authors have outlined the traits common to heroes across cultures and time. What we see when we consider the characteristics of heroes over time is that they do not change a great deal; traits that were considered heroic nearly 40 years ago still apply to heroes in the 21st Century. It is important to define the characteristics of heroes so we can understand what the motives behind their actions and determine whether said actions are altruistic, individualistic or redemptive.

Richard Reynolds (1972) outlines the defining characteristics of a superhero. He notes that not all traits have to apply to all characters. The first trait Reynolds notes is that the hero typically grows up without having a relationship with their parents. Some superheroes have near god-like powers, and heroes with lesser powers interact with them easily. In addition, the hero is more committed to justice being served than to obeying the law. As a means of highlighting a hero's extraordinary powers, they will be placed in ordinary surroundings and if the hero has an



alter-ego, that alter ego will have a mundane life. Further, superheroes can display a great deal of patriotism and loyalty to the state, while at the same time not being devoted to its laws. Lastly, Reynolds notes that science and magic are the same in comics, and they are used to create a sense of wonder and mystery.

Reynold's based his traits of a superhero on the Classical Grecco-Roman hero archetype. Romagnoli and Pagnucci (2013) outlined five traits shared by all superheroes. They outline some of the same traits as Reynolds, but are more focused on dissecting the hero mentality by discussing heroes' goals and weaknesses. Hero origins are typically informed by tragedy: from the death of their parents to the destruction of their home planet, virtually every superhero has experienced some type of tragic, character defining loss. In addition, they are obsessed with achieving goals: Once a hero knows what they have to do, they are tirelessly, single-mindedly driven to do it. Third, the hero is a solitary figure: Almost all superheroes start their journey as a lone figure, only teaming up with others to achieve their ultimate goals. The hero's goal is unattainable: world peace or the complete elimination of evil/corruption are unrealistic goals, even for superheroes. Lastly, the hero has a weakness. It can be a weakness that interferes with their superpowers, or one that keeps them from thinking clearly, but no hero is completely invincible.

Reynolds, Romagoli and Pagnucci's ideas dovetail with those of Trip McCrossin (2018), who expanded the idea of what makes a hero by examining the hero's motivations. Firstly, McCrossin claimed heroes act to safeguard others. While the scope of their safeguards may vary, he states that, "locally or globally, you're not much of a hero if you're not doing basic safekeeping. McCrossin elaborates by stating heroes protect those around them, near or far, in a manner that's moral. McCrossin notes that though the moral justifications of a superhero's

actions may not be immediately apparent given the collateral damage they cause; they are ultimately working towards the greater good. McCrossin's third trait of a hero is that heroes safeguard those around them in a way that is not only moral, but altruistic. The ultimate goal of a hero's actions is restricted to moral and beneficial safeguarding. The heroes do not take the actions they take for the sake of looking heroic; they take those actions because they are necessary to protect others. Lastly, heroes protect others in a way that is generally moral, specifically altruistic and also atypical. Heroes are willing to take actions others are unwilling, though not necessarily unable, to take, and if their actions were typical, their heroism would be rendered meaningless by commonality.

The works of Reynolds, McCrossin and Romagnoli and Pagnucci will inform this thesis by providing a set of standards by which the actions of Rogers and Stark can be evaluated for their heroism. While not all traits apply to both characters, we see several traits that are repeated across lists, indicating that they are the most important. For the purposes of this study, the traits of a hero are, that they have a tragic backstory and are solitary characters until they must join a team to achieve a larger goal; they act to protect and defend citizens when normal defensive institutions like law enforcement and the military are insufficient, and lastly, they are willing to break the rules and defy authority to do what they believe is right and to protect those who can't protect themselves. Our standards for judging the character's actions will be whether those actions protect others, the motivation behind those actions and the results of those actions.

Superheroes embody American cultural ideals and can lead us to examine those values (Romagnoli & Pagnucci, 2013, p. 8). Those values emphasize characters' motivations to do good, their passion for justice and their opposition to evil, and heroes are "generally considered to be correct in their actions." (p.8.) In the MCU, there is a clear line between good and evil; we

as viewers have no question who the bad guys are. According to Pizzaro and Baumeister comic book morality, with its exaggerated nature, gives us an escape into a world where good and evil are clearly defined and good always wins (2013). However, as this study will show, good and evil is not always a black and white issue, and characters often struggle with what they believe is right and what they are expected to do by institutions of authority.

Malloy (2018) discusses the motivations of Rogers and Stark and how they, respectively, cope with and learn from failure, saying, “Steve Rogers became Captain America to save his country; Tony Stark became Iron Man to save himself” (p. 30). Malloy states Rogers had traits that made him a born hero, but Stark had to learn to be a hero by perseverance through failure. He goes on to say that, while Rogers rarely doubts himself or the justification for his actions, Stark constantly questions himself and the ramifications of his actions. Thus, Stark can accept failure and go back to the drawing board to try new ideas, whereas Rogers can’t accept failure and just fights his way out of situations through sheer will and tenacity.

It’s important to examine the dichotomy between Rogers and Stark because of what they represent and how that is a commentary on the values of modern American society.

Rogers connects ideas of American nationalism, internal order and foreign policy, serving as a literal embodiment of the American identity (Ditmer, 2011). When the character was created in 1940, it tapped into the patriotic atmosphere of the time and represented America’s geopolitical narrative: Rogers carries a shield, which symbolizes the idea that America only acts in the name of security. Rogers defends the ideals of liberty, equality and self-government, which are the tenets of American exceptionalism, a term used to describe the attitude that America is superior to all other countries. The definition of American Exceptionalism I use in

this thesis comes from S.M. Lipset's (1997) *American Exceptionalism: A double-Edged Sword*. Ditmer compares Rogers to the archetype of the American cowboy, "the man of purely innocent intention who draws second in the gun battle but shoots more quickly and accurately than the dastardly foe...he is the embodiment of a civil religion that seeks to redeem the world for democracy but by means that transcend democratic limits on exercise of power" (2011). While Rogers may be motivated to serve others by altruism, he is still an individualist. Throughout the films, Rogers frequently defies orders and breaks rules to do what he believes is right. Rogers is devoted to opposing those who harm others, much more than he is devoted to the government or systems of authority; we will see numerous examples of this in the analysis. In his own words, Captain America fights "against injustice...against cynicism...against intolerance" (Samuelson, quoting *Captain America #471*, 2018).

Stan Lee, the creator of Iron Man, called Tony Stark the "quintessential Capitalist". He comes from the neoliberal ideology first espoused by British Philosophers John Locke and Adam Smith, who believed that people are naturally free, autonomous and equal (Samuelson, 2018). Locke believed people had the right to defend their property against being taken over by the government, and this idea is evident in Stark when he refuses to hand over the plans for his Iron Man suits to the government.

While the concept of capitalism was initially discussed by British Scholars, it's obvious that America is a capitalist society. The combination of the traits of these two very different characters reflect several of the values American society celebrates: service of others, intelligence, the embrace of technology, personal accountability, tenacity, thinking for one's self and selflessness. By analyzing Rogers and Stark, we can gain a better understanding of what American society values in its heroes and what it aspires to be. Understanding our shared cultural

values could serve to remind us of what we have in common, not just with our fellow Americans, but with people all over the world.

The existing body of research into superheroes gives us a good basis for measuring what makes a hero. Pertaining to Rogers and Stark, we will analyze instances where the heroes act to protect the vulnerable, regardless of the personal costs. We will also evaluate times when heroes keep fighting even in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds. We'll look at how the heroes assume personal responsibility for their actions and seek to right their wrongs. Lastly, we'll evaluate instances in which heroes defy systems, institutions and people of authority for the greater good, even if that puts them at odds with the law.

### Methodology

I'll perform an ideological analysis of the 10 films in the MCU that feature Rogers and/or Stark, which are: *Iron Man* (2008); *Iron Man II* (2010); *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011); *Marvel's The Avengers* (2012); *Iron Man III* (2013); *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014); *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015); *Captain America: Civil War* (2016); *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018); and *Avengers: Endgame* (2019). The study will focus on these films because they are the films in the franchise that most clearly define these characters and provide the clearest examples of the traits to be explored. While both characters do make brief appearances in other films in the franchise, those appearances are inconsequential to the study and mainly exist for the purposes of creating story continuity and narrative world-building. The films will be analyzed for scenes in which each character's words and/or actions exemplify individualism, altruism and redemption. Actions and words from the characters will be categorized as altruistic when they save others from harm at an emotional or physical cost to the

character (Batson, 2010). Individualistic acts will be those that are contradictory to laws, regulations, direct orders and the advice of others, when a character acts in a way that is contradictory to the status quo, or acts that a character takes in his own best interest (Allik, 2004). Redemptive acts will be defined as things that are done in an effort to correct a previous mistake made by one of the characters.

### Analysis

When your study involves watching superheroes punch robots and fight aliens to save the universe, the analysis portion of the process can be a lot of fun. I viewed approximately 20 hours of MCU films to conduct this analysis, dissecting fantasy entertainment to explore its deeper meanings and interpretations. I will analyze the ways that Rogers embodies altruism, how Stark seeks redemption, and the value in which they overlap – individualism. What we will see over the course of the films is that Rogers and Stark learn from each other and change. Stark becomes less selfish and more altruistic as the story progresses until his final act of ultimate altruism and redemption. In addition, Stark works throughout the series to redeem himself for his mistakes, often making even greater mistakes in the process. Meanwhile, Rogers shifts from being an altruistic soldier to an individualistic leader, and he adapts to living in the modern era. Rogers' arc represents a cultural shift in values that occurred post WWII from a more collectivist, altruistic to a more individualistic culture. The redemption arc does not apply to Rogers, so it will not be discussed in his portion of the analysis.

## Steve Rogers

Steve Rogers is a “kid from Brooklyn” (Johnston, 2011) who wants to serve his country in WWII. Although he is small and sickly, Rogers shows an ability to think outside the box, empathy, tenacity, and courage that makes him the ideal candidate for the Super Soldier program. Through all the trials and growth he experiences throughout his story arc in the MCU, he remains kind, humble and committed to doing the right thing, while realizing the right thing in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is not as black and white as it was in 1945.

The purpose of this section is to categorize specific examples of the words and actions of Steve Rogers as altruistic, individualistic or redemptive. Rogers believes in following orders and the rule of law, and generally trusts the institutions of authority in his life, at least initially. Rogers is a representation of post-WWII American values: he is honest, loyal, polite, humble, believes in personal accountability and has a patriotic drive to serve others; his true superpower is his inherent goodness. Rogers is a product of the time in which he was created, and as such, the line between good and evil is very clearly drawn; the U.S. and Allied Forces were seen as the “good guys,” Nazis and the Axis Powers were seen as “the bad guys”. Consequently, Rogers’ morality is binary. However, as his character arc progresses, we see Rogers go from being a pure, almost naive altruist to an individualist, particularly after the events of *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* and *Captain America: Civil War*. However, though his worldview and the way in which he handles situations changes dramatically, his core ideals of doing the right thing, protecting the innocent and upholding freedom remain unchanged.

## Altruism

Within minutes of the opening of *Captain America: The First Avenger*, it is established to the audience that Steve Rogers is altruistic. Before the movie opens, Rogers has tried unsuccessfully to enlist in the military to serve in WWII several times. When asked why he doesn't try to help the war effort in another way, Rogers balks at the idea, saying "There are men laying down their lives. I've got no right to do any less than them. This isn't about me (Johnston, 2011). After he's approached by Dr. Abraham Erskine and asked if he wants to join the military so he can kill Nazis, his response is an example of the trait of the hero defending others regardless of the personal cost. "I don't want to kill anyone. I don't like bullies, I don't care where they're from" (Johnston, 2011). Even though he is small and weak, and the audience has seen him beaten up by a "bully", Rogers maintains a desire to stand up to those who use their power to oppress other people. During morning boot camp drills, Rogers' commanding officer tosses a dummy grenade amongst the troops to see how they will react. While the other troops run away and take cover, Rogers dives on the grenade, using his body to protect the others from the blast while shouting for them to get back. That act is altruism and is ultimately what led to Rogers being chosen for the super soldier procedure, setting him on the path to becoming a superhero.

During the process that transforms Rogers into a super soldier, and the transformation process is quite painful, as we hear Rogers cry out in pain as the intensity of the transformation pod is increased. Erskine tries to stop the process, but Rogers refuses and endures the procedure. Yet another example of Roger's altruism is his willingness to fight enemies he knows he cannot defeat in an effort to either distract the enemies or mitigate loss of civilian lives. This is an example of Rogers acting to defend others regardless of the personal cost and the willingness to fight insurmountable odds. In *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, we see Rogers battling robots that are



physically much stronger and faster than him, and in *Avengers: Infinity War* and *Avengers: Endgame*, Rogers fights Thanos, the most powerful being in the universe, and is almost killed by the Mad Titan.

While Rogers remains an altruist at heart, the events of *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* have a drastic effect on Rogers and set him on a more individualistic path. When he learns that S.H.I.E.L.D. has been infiltrated by Hydra, the Nazi science division he takes on in the first movie, his trust in systems of authority and bureaucratic hierarchy are shaken. This is when Rogers learns that doing “the right thing” is not always about following orders.

### Individualism

While Rogers always acts for the greater good, and is motivated by his altruistic nature, we see examples of individualism early on in his story. In *The First Avenger*, Rogers lies about his identity on his enlistment forms in an effort to join the Army. During his time in boot camp during a long run, Rogers drill instructor challenges Rogers and his unit to retrieve a flag from the top of a flagpole, with the soldier who does so will ride back to base in a Jeep with Agent Peggy Carter. The other soldiers all try to climb the flagpole and the drill instructor, quickly becoming frustrated, orders the troops to fall back in and continue running. Rogers ignores the order, walks over to the flagpole and removes a pin in the bottom, causing it to fall over so he can retrieve the flag. This is another example of Rogers’ individualism.

Later, after he has been transformed by the super soldier serum, Rogers is given a direct order not to try to rescue a group of soldiers, including his lifelong best friend, from a German POW camp behind enemy lines. Rogers ignores the order, choosing to save his friend and his colleagues. This is an example of Rogers defying authority for the greater good; Steve and his

colleagues form the Howling Commandos, making strategic strikes against Hydra that advanced the Allied war effort.

In *The Winter Soldier*, Rogers is alarmed when he learns of Project Insight, an advanced weapons system designed to preemptively strike to neutralize threats against the U.S. He goes to visit an elderly Peggy Carter, who is suffering from a form of dementia, and the audience gets its first hint that Steve's trust in institutions is fading and he is becoming more of an individualist. He says, "For as long as I can remember, I've just wanted to do what was right. I guess I'm not quite sure what that is anymore. And I thought I could throw myself back in and follow orders, serve. But it's just not the same" (Russo and Russo, 2014).

Once he learns S.H.I.E.L.D. has been infiltrated by Hydra, he decides to dismantle the organization he's devoted his life to since he was awakened in the modern era, going against his allegiance to S.H.I.E.L.D. by destroying Project Insight. This shows that Steve, while he has always respected institutions of authority, has always been an individualist at his core. It is in this film that Steve learns that the institutions of authority he placed his trust in are not always altruistic, and he shifts his focus fully to the Avengers.

*Captain America: Civil War* is the film in which Rogers transitions from a starry-eyed altruist to a pragmatic individualist. When the Avengers are asked to sign the Sokovia Accords, placing the team under United Nations oversight, Rogers rejects the idea because he is distrustful of having his actions controlled by another quasi-governmental organization. In a discussion with Stark, Rogers makes his feelings clear when he says,

The U.N. is run by people with agendas and agendas change. If we sign this we surrender our right to choose. What if this panel sends us somewhere we don't think we should go? What if there's somewhere we need to go and they won't let us? The safest hands are still

our own.” (Russo and Russo, 2016). Later in the film, we learn that Rogers lied to Stark about how his parents died. He justifies the lie by saying he was trying to protect Stark from the truth, and was also protecting his friend, Bucky Barnes, who was brainwashed by Hydra and was acting on their orders when he killed Stark’s parents. Their ensuing altercation ends with Rogers throwing down the Captain America shield, effectively rejecting his role in the Avengers. At the conclusion of the film, we’re led to believe Rogers has helped his cohorts escape from prison, another act of individualism. The film concludes with a voiceover of Rogers reading a letter he’d written to Stark where he clearly states that he does not place his trust with authoritative agencies, but with people:

My faith is in people I guess, individuals. And I’m happy to say, for the most part, they haven’t let me down....I know you’re doing what you believe is right, and that’s all any of us can do. That’s all any of us should do. (Russo and Russo, 2016).

The next appearance of Rogers, in *Avengers: Infinity War*, we see a very different representation of Rogers. He has been in hiding in Wakanda for several years, but springs into action when he’s contacted by Bruce Banner and warned of the threat Thanos poses. He finds Vision and Wanda, who have also been hiding together, and protects them from Proxima Midnight and Corvus Glaive, two of the children of Thanos, who are trying to remove the reality stone from Vision’s head. When he returns to the Avengers headquarters, He learns that Stark left Earth on Thanos’ ship, and is confronted by Secretary of Defense Thaddeus Ross, who tells him all is not forgiven for Rogers’ refusal to sign the Sokovia Accords. Rogers’ response, “I’m not looking for forgiveness, and I’m way past asking permission” (Russo and Russo, 2018). The open defiance of authority in the line marks Rogers’ transition to being a staunch individualist who will do what he believes is right regardless of whether or not it aligns with the law. Again,

Rogers shows that he is willing to defy authority for the greater good. At the conclusion of *Avengers: Endgame*, Rogers takes his first truly selfish action by choosing to stay in 1945 and live a life with Peggy Carter. The movie made it clear that Stark played a role in the decision, “Well after I put the stones back, I thought...maybe I’ll try some of that life Tony was telling me to get,” (Russo and Russo, 2019). The Steve Rogers we met in *The First Avenger* would never make such a selfish decision; he would return to the present time and continue to serve humanity out of a sense of duty. However, as Rogers becomes more of an individualist, and as he is influenced by Stark throughout the course of the films, he learns that it’s okay to do some things for oneself. Rogers sees going back in time and living a happy life as a way of honoring Stark’s sacrifice.

### Tony Stark

While Rogers begins his journey motivated by pure altruism, as the story arc progresses, we see him incorporate more individualistic thinking and behaviors. Next, we’ll discuss Tony Stark, who begins his arc as an individualist. But, through his search for redemption, he becomes more altruistic. When the audience is introduced to Stark, he is “arrogant, self-centered and narcissistic to the point of sociopath” (Malloy, 2018). Stark is portrayed as a self-described “genius, billionaire, playboy, philanthropist” (Wedon, 2012).

This section will be devoted to categorizing the acts of Tony Stark as altruistic, individualistic and redemptive. At the beginning of his story arc, Stark is wealthy, confident, intelligent, and flamboyantly individualistic, traits that are valued in modern American Society. His true superpower is not the Iron Man suit, it is his tremendous intelligence. After facing his own mortality during the climax of *The Avengers*, Stark begins to understand the magnitude of threats against humanity and feels the burdensome weight of responsibility to protect the whole

world from existential threats. This causes Stark to make unilateral decisions that often create larger problems despite his good intentions, filling him with a deep need for redemption and a chance to right his prior wrongs. Just as Rogers is changed by his experiences and becomes more individualistic, Stark too learns from his experiences and becomes more altruistic.

### Altruism

Stark commits numerous acts that protect and benefit others during his first two films. But those acts are driven by his desire for redemption. He stops manufacturing weapons and switches the focus of his company to arc reactor energy because doing so will prevent him from being tangentially involved in harming innocent people. He protects people, but those people are often in danger because of his actions. Every instance of danger Pepper Potts is put in during the first two films is a direct result of something Tony does. He does not commit his first act of altruism until his third movie in the *Infinity Saga*, *The Avengers*, when he flies a nuclear missile into outer space to protect New York City while it is under alien attack.

Stark commits the act knowing full well he may die in the process because his suit, at that time, is not equipped to function in space. In signing the Sokovia Accords, Stark is trying to be altruistic; he believes placing the Avengers under some form of oversight is for the greater good; but, it could also be argued that Stark signed the Accords so he will not be held accountable for the collateral damage caused when the team acts. So, while Stark is trying to do the right thing, he's also trying to assuage his guilt. In *Avengers: Infinity War*, when he boards a spaceship bound for Titan to face off with Thanos, knowing it was, as he called it, a "one-way trip" (Russo and Russo, 2018). Stark's final act of altruism results in his death, when he defeats Thanos by using the Infinity Stones. Stark commits numerous "good" acts that protect the world; but, until

he takes the missile into space, his actions are more motivated by individualism and redemption than by altruism.

### Individualism

Individualism lies at the core of Stark's persona. At the beginning of his story arc, he is portrayed as careless, reckless and selfish. He lives by his own rules and flaunts authority and responsibility. His first significant act of individualism is when he builds the first Iron Man suit to escape captivity when he is kidnapped by insurgents. He then creates more advanced Iron Man suits and refuses repeatedly to hand over his plans or a prototype to the government, using the same reasoning that Rogers used when he refused to sign the Sokovia Accords. During a Congressional hearing, Stark openly mocks the idea of giving his suit design to the military. "You want my property? You can't have it, but I just did you a favor-I have successfully privatized world peace. I will continue to serve this great nation at the pleasure of myself" (Favreau, 2010). Another example of Stark's individualism is in *Iron Man 3* when he addresses the villain, the Mandarin, on a television broadcast and gives out his home address, prompting an attack. At the conclusion of the film, we see that Stark has created multiple suits with different capabilities and designed for different types of environments. One of the most pivotal examples of Stark's individualism is his creation of the Iron Legion and Ultron. He created the robots without discussing it with the entire team, involving only Bruce Banner in his plans. The decision to create Ultron and program it to protect the earth rather than mankind results in the destruction of Sokovia and the loss of thousands of innocent lives. This decision directly influences his need for redemption that fuels all his choices from here on out.

## Redemption

Redemption is a recurring motivation for Stark throughout the films in which he is featured. He decides to design the Mark II Iron Man suit after he sees that insurgents have purchased his weapons illegally and they are being used to kill civilians. While individualism is the reason Stark creates the first Iron Man suit, redemption is the reason Stark improved his original design and started hunting down those who used his weapons to commit illegal acts of terror. Redemption was his primary motivation to join the Avengers. In the cases of *Iron Man 2* and *Iron Man 3*, Stark created his enemies through his egotism, and needs to defeat them to “fight his demons” and clean up his own mess.

In *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, Stark literally created his antagonist and had to defeat it to prevent further catastrophe. In *Captain America: Civil War*, Stark tries to atone for creating Ultron by signing the Sokovia Accords, fracturing the Avengers in a way that is not resolved until *Avengers: Endgame*. In that film, Stark takes redemptive action by helping Dr. Bruce Banner design the gauntlet used to bring back all the people Thanos eliminated with “the snap.” When Stark wields the gauntlet and dies reversing “the snap” and destroying Thanos, it is not only altruistic, as described above, it is also Stark’s final act of redemption. Given that his decision saved the entire universe, it is safe to say he earned the redemption he sought. This is evidenced in the MCU film that followed *Endgame*, *Spiderman: Far From Home* (Watts, 2019). While Stark does not appear in the film, he is frequently referenced, and it is obvious that he is heralded as a hero and his past mistakes have been all but forgotten.

## Conclusion

*Captain America: Civil War* is the most pivotal film in the Infinity Saga for both Rogers and Stark. Where we once saw Stark openly rejecting regulation and oversight, the things he's experienced as a hero have changed him, and he now yearns for oversight, not only to assuage his own guilt but also to shift responsibility for the collateral damage the Avengers cause away from himself. Although Stark has learned some humility, self-sacrifice and how to work with a team, his actions are still motivated by trying to undo the damage he's done; to somehow redeem himself and make up for all the innocent lives his actions have impacted. Rogers, once the dutiful soldier who unquestioningly followed orders, has now rejected all forms of authority, even rejecting his role in the Avengers, to remain true to his belief in doing the right thing and remaining loyal to his principles, even though doing so makes him a fugitive and puts him in opposition to the very government he once served.

While Rogers and Stark are at odds over a number of issues throughout the films, they respect one another, and realize that they are more powerful as a team than they are separately. Stark is never more selfless and altruistic than he is when he's part of a team; the team serves to help him keep his ego in check and reminds him that he is not solely responsible for protecting the world. Rogers, a natural leader, is also stronger as part of a team, because he understands how to use each team member's unique strengths to achieve the overall goal.

The purpose of this analysis has been to explain how Steve Rogers exemplifies altruism and individualism, and how Tony Stark represents redemption and individualism, and to explore how these values reflect American cultural values. The significant actions of the characters were categorized as altruistic or individualistic, and in the case of Stark, redemptive. Through the course of the films, the characters learn from each other, and in the end, Rogers adopts some



individualistic tendencies and Stark adopts altruistic traits. It is important to analyze these movies to decode both the overt and subtle messages they deliver about heroism, systems of authority, the value of following rules and how a person's internal morals can often conflict with what's expected of them. They use their strengths to protect those who can't protect themselves; they work with a team when the task is too great to accomplish alone; they work to correct their mistakes and try to make the world a better, safer place. Future researchers may examine how these films justify the use of violence by heroes and the justifications for collateral damage they cause. They could also explore gender roles, race, and socioeconomic status as portrayed in the MCU to discuss other ways these films could potentially reflect and influence society.

Rogers represents the past, Stark represents the future, and both have traits that are valued in American culture. We need people like Rogers, with goodness and a willingness to sacrifice themselves to protect others, and we need people like Stark, who use their intelligence to advance technology for the betterment and security of society.

In criticizing the MCU, legendary director Martin Scorsese told *Empire* magazine that the films weren't "the cinema of human beings trying to convey emotional, psychological experiences to another human being" (Semelyn, 2019). But when audiences see Stark try to protect humanity, fail time and time again, and ultimately succeed; when they see Rogers turn away from the institutions he's built his life around because he considers them corrupt, we see the emotions they feel portrayed on the screen. We see Stark's guilt and his constant drive to improve, and Rogers' unfaltering devotion to doing "the right thing." We see the internal conflict this causes in them, and we see that they use that conflict to motivate them to keep fighting, even when the odds are overwhelmingly stacked against them. The emotional conflict the characters deal with humanizes them and makes them relatable.

Though the stories of Captain America and Iron Man have reached their conclusion in the MCU, the influence of these characters will continue to reverberate through the MCU for years to come, with films like *Spiderman-Far From Home* serving as an example. Rogers and Stark not only influenced each other, they influenced every other hero they interacted with in the *Infinity Saga*.

### References

- Allik J, Realo A. (2004) Individualism-Collectivism and Social Capital. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 35(1):29-49. doi:10.1177/0022022103260381.
- Batson, C.D. (2010). Altruism. In *The Corsini Encyclopedia of Psychology* (eds I.B. Weiner and W.E. Craighead). doi:10.1002/9780470479216.corpsy0040.
- Clark, T. (2019, July 22). The 10 highest-grossing movies of all time, including 'Avengers: Endgame'. Retrieved from <https://www.businessinsider.com/highest-grossing-movies-all-time-worldwide-box-office-2018-4>
- Dittmer, J. (2005) Captain America's Empire: Reflections on Identity, Popular Culture, and Post-9/11 Geopolitics, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 95:3, 626-643, DOI: [10.1111/j.1467-8306.2005.00478.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8306.2005.00478.x)
- Indick, W. (2004). Mythological Creation Of Meaning As Basis For Communication In Modern Society. *Journal of Media Psychology*, 9(3). doi:10.15405/epsbs.2018.02.146.
- Lipset, S. M. (1997). *American Exceptionalism*. United Kingdom: W.W. Norton.
- Michaud, N. (2018). *Iron man vs. Captain America and philosophy: Give me liberty or keep me safe*, Chapter 2, Chapter 3, Chapter 7, Chapter 10. Chicago, IL: Open Court.

Peasley, R. (2007) Superheroes, “Moral Economy” and the “Iron Cage”: Morailty, Alienation and the Superhero in Haslem, H., Mackie, C. & Ndalianis, A. (Eds.) Superheroes: from Hercules to Superman, pp. 37-50, New Academia Publishing.

Reynolds, R. (1994). Superheroes: A modern mythology. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

Romagnoli, A. S., & Pagnucci, G. S. (2013). Enter the superheroes: American values, culture, and the canon of superhero literature. Lanham: The Scarecrow Press.

Semlyen, N. D. (2019, November 07). The Irishman Week: Empire's Martin Scorsese Interview. Retrieved from <https://www.empireonline.com/movies/features/irishman-week-martin-scorsese-interview/>

#### *Data Points*

Black, S. (director). (2013). *Iron Man III* [Motion picture]. United States: Marvel Studios.

Favreau, J. (director). (2008). *Iron Man* [Motion picture]. United States: Marvel Studios.

Favreau, J. (director). (2010). *Iron Man II* [Motion picture]. United States: Marvel Studios.

Johnston, J. (director). (2011). *Captain America: The First Avenger* [Motion picture]. United States: Marvel Studios.

Russo, A. & Russo, J. (directors). (2014). *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* [Motion picture]. United States: Marvel Studios.

Russo, A. & Russo, J. (directors). (2016). *Captain America: Civil War* [Motion picture]. United States: Marvel Studios.

Russo, A. & Russo, J. (directors). (2019). *Avengers: Endgame* [Motion picture]. United States: Marvel Studios.

Russo, A. & Russo, J. (directors). (2018). *Avengers: Infinity War* [Motion picture]. United States: Marvel Studios.

Watts, J. (director). (2019). *Spiderman: Far From Home* [Motion Picture]. United States: Sony Pictures.

Wedon, J. (director). (2012). *The Avengers* [Motion picture]. United States: Marvel Studios.

Wedon, J. (director). (2015). *Avengers: Age of Ultron* [Motion picture]. United States: Marvel Studios.

ProQuest Number:28261976

All rights reserved

INFORMATION TO ALL USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent on the quality of the copy submitted.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.



ProQuest 28261976

Published by ProQuest LLC (2021). Copyright of the Dissertation is held by the Author.

All Rights Reserved.

This work is protected against unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code  
Microform Edition © ProQuest LLC.

ProQuest LLC  
789 East Eisenhower Parkway  
P.O. Box 1346  
Ann Arbor, MI 48106 - 1346