Becoming A Superhuman

## BECOMING A SUPERHUMAN (A COMPARATIVE STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS OF SUPERHEROES MOVIE)

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## **Abstract**

This study is a structural comparative analysis of two superhero movies Spiderman (2002) and Ironman (2008). The structure of a narrative can be seen from its surface or deep structure, and the one analyzed here is the surface structure to find the deepest one. This article explores events undergone at the level of the first two movies that have the same process of becoming a superhero. The second question seeks to find the power source of the superheroes. using Larsen and Johansen's elaboration on semiotics' structure and action of the narration, the article shows that the two movies use the same structural step in building the stories in three main elements namely the act to will, the knowledge, and the ability.

**Keywords**: comparative structural, superhuman, superheroes movie

### Abstrak

Penelitian ini merupakan analisis komparatif struktural dari dua film superhero Spiderman (2002) dan Ironman (2008). Struktur sebuah narasi dapat dilihat dari permukaannya atau struktur dalamnya, dan yang dianalisis di sini adalah struktur permukaannya untuk menemukan yang terdalam. Artikel ini mengeksplorasi peristiwa yang dialami pada level pertama apakah kedua film tersebut memiliki proses yang sama untuk menjadi superhero? Pertanyaan kedua mencari sumber kekuatan para superhero. Menggunakan elaborasi Larsen dan Johansen tentang struktur semiotika dan tindakan narasi, artikel tersebut menunjukkan bahwa kedua film tersebut pada dasarnya menggunakan langkah struktural yang sama dalam membangun cerita dalam tiga elemen utama yaitu tindakan untuk kemauan, pengetahuan, dan kemampuan.

Kata kunci: struktural komparatif, superhuman, superheroes

## A. INTRODUCTION

Superheroes' story has ruled the genre of movie production today. This kind of story always plots individuals possessing superpowers and makes them extraordinarily different from communal people. The figure of superhero today can be found in the movie character such as Superman, Batman, Spiderman, Captain Marvel . The story goes by competing power between individuals who act as superhero and as villains.

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The plot of superhero stories is always about human transformation. Many of those stories depart from the life of ordinary human beings which later transform into extraordinary heroes. The hero can be an orphan or powerless which signifies their young man powerless in terms of knowledge, economy, and spirituality. The plot of the superhero stories does not stop on the powerless and orphanage character but continues to show the transformation of their characters from nothing something, from powerless to powerful. It shows the hero's journey to achieve human perfection. Perfection itself is not a stagnant fate that people wait to change, but human beings act to take a lonely journey and bravely and sincerely encounter some difficulties to experience changes extraordinary great and transformation.

This journey is largely described in the epic, Roman, and spiritual tradition, and the character-occupied actions are called a hero. These stories recite journey paths accomplished in this world to become powerful and great men. These great men are those who have worked on this earth and who were the leaders of men and known as legends.

Certainly, those stories perform as a practical guide to the audiences on how to become a great man. The narration turns them to be modelers, patterns, and in a wide sense creator, of whatsoever the general mass of men contrived to do or to attain (Carlyle). In modern society, the stories narrate patterns to achieve superiority, dominance, and success.

From Western epic to the present American superhero, they have been renarrated how white European men are the natural masters of the world because they are strong, brave, skillful, rational, and dedicated. They tell how they overpower dangers of nature; how other 'inferior' races have been subdued by them, and how they spread civilization and order wherever they go. They also recite how women are created to serve them, and how those women who decline to do so are threats to the natural order and must be educated. They narrate how their persistence means that they always eventually win the glittering prizes, the golden treasures, and how the gods—or government—approve of enterprises. The stories have become favorite stories and they have been told so many times that people have come to believe that what they say about the world is true. Superhero story follows those pattern and surely performs as a practical guide to becoming superhuman.

However, the topic of superheroes remains unexplored in the realm of academic literary research. One of the reason is that superhero is considered popular literature which contains lower value compared to serious literature whose content consists of a high value of culture. Much research found tends to go back to search legends using Joseph Campbell such as Nurwahidah's and Rosmini's. Other research attracts me to see the social dimension of superhero movies such as a research conducted by **Roblow** "Complex Yann on Masculinities: The Superhero In Modern

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American Movies" which discusses the increase in the production of superhero movies made in Hollywood. It also presents some of the essential elements that make masculinities more complex in cultural production. "Holy Megabucks Batman! The Astounding Popularity of Movies by Superhero Timothy McGettigan, "On Superhero Stories: The Cinematic Marvel Universe Tolkienesque Fantasy" by AG Holder, "Superheroes: The Philosophy Behind the Modern Myth" by Miroslav Kohut, "Superhero Comics and the Popular Geopolitics of American Identity" Bc. Mervi Miettinen demonstrates the significance of the relationship between popular geopolitics and superhero comics and the relevance of this relationship in and redefining defining popular American national identity from the late 20th century to the early 21st century. They explore the philosophical richness behind popular culture's phenomenon of superheroes. All of this existing research explores the philosophical concept of a superhero.

Unlike the existing research, this article tries to compare the structure of plotting found in the movies by using comparative literary analysis. comparative literature method helps to identify the pattern that frequently occurs in a superhero movie. It also helps to identify the distinction of each pattern. This approach helps to give meaning to phenomena of similarities differences in superhero movies. The object material contains superhero movies that narrate the process of becoming superheroes and the source of power from two selected superhero movies namely Iron Man (2008), and Spiderman (2002).

Furthermore, the identification of structural patterns which influence the transformation of superheroes is an interesting phenomenon. Different from Joseph Campbell's theory of monomyth which paid attention to the departure of the hero until their return, this research only focuses on the event transformation that allows them to have access to superpower. Therefore the first part of the paper clarifies the definition of hero and superhero, then it explains the process taken by the superhero that transforms them into a superhero and their source of power that transforms them into a superhero. The list consists of a discussion regarding the distinction of this modern superhero story.

## **B. LITERATURE REVIEW**

## Hero, Epic Hero, and Superhero

Great men have been narrated and renarrated in many cultures and traditions. The great men in the narration were the leader of men. The leader has been the great ones, the modelers that people follow their steps. Yet, throughout history, leader changes in form. It was known as a hero then it comes a superhero. Therefore, the terms hero and superhero need clarification.

## 1. Definition of Hero

The English word "hero" comes from the Greek word hero, which probably had the original meaning of "protector." American Heritage Dictionary identifies a hero in mythology and legend as a man born of one mortal and one divine parent, blessed with great courage and strength, celebrated for his bold exploits, and

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favored by the gods. Generally, a Hero is also viewed as any man known for feats of courage or nobility of purpose; especially, one who has risked or sacrificed his life. Besides that, a hero also is prominent in some event, field, period, or cause because of his special achievements or contribution. In literary work, a hero is recognized by the principal character in a novel, poem, or dramatic presentation. He regarded as a potential lover or protector. Hero is human and it could be male or female. The hero came from the remote past, endowed with superhuman abilities, and descended from the immortal god. Achilles is one example. Achilles is an epic hero. One characteristic of a hero is that he or she is a descendant of an immortal God, yet the greatest hero himself is mortal. In the world of epic, seriousness of death experienced only by humans.

In literature are found many kinds of heroes. One of them is a tragic or Aristotelian hero who is described as a protagonist brought to essentially as a consequence of some extreme quality which is both his greatness and his downfall. Another is Epic Hero who is a literary character from ancient mythology and other stories, which were written down in the form of long, narrative epic poems. The hero is the main character, or protagonist, of the poem. The reader follows the epic hero through a series of adventures and obstacles. Most epic heroes possess most or all of seven general characteristics namely nobility (commoners usually do not become epic heroes), capable of deeds of great strength and courage, great warrior, travels over countries (cannot be an epic hero if you stay in your village your whole life), national heroism, humility (commits his deeds because he knows they need doing, and the fame and rewards that he receives are only a matter of course, not the reason for completing his quests) and faces supernatural Foes and/or receives supernatural help which makes them mortal. Death determines the heroes' humanity which is distinct from animals who are unaware of their future death and from immortal god. Most epic stories detailly narrate the death of all warrior heroes in the battle.

2. Superhero

A hero is slightly different from a superhero. Unlike a hero which is mostly found in epic poems, mythology, or legend, a superhero has become a genre of a movie. This term is derived from comic characters. The superhero movie is usually an adaptation of a successful comic. Yet, now not all superhero movies are adapted from comic books, some of them originally written for movies. The term superhero is more modern and used in comics, games, and movies only, meanwhile, classical literature tends to use the term hero and the term tragic hero. High literature plays with the hero or tragic hero, meanwhile, popular culture prefers the superhero character. Superman is a superhero; Captain Marvel is a superhero; Spiderman is a superhero. Cogan (2006: 30) identifies three characteristics of superheroes usually portrayed in movies.

First, the superhero is usually characterized by a heroic character with a selfless, pro-social mission; superpowers extraordinary abilities, advanced technology, highly developed or physical, mental, or mystical skills. Second, the superhero also has a identity embodied superhero codename and iconic costume, which typically express his biography, character, powers, or origin (transformation from ordinary person to superhero). Third, often superheroes can be distinguished from characters of related genres (fantasy, science fiction, detective, etc.) by a preponderance of conventions. Usually, generic

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superheroes have dual identities, the ordinary one of which is usually a closely guarded secret and the extraordinary one of which he transforms into a superhero.

Based on the explanation, the most significant distinctive appearance of a superhero from the hero are first the superhero's source of power is related to the development of modern technology and modern knowledge. Meanwhile, the hero's source of power is the help from his ancestor or god to whom they descendants.

3. The way to Superhero

Structural analysis of the plot is used to compare the plot that occurs in the two movies. Since the superhero is considered to be part of popular literature, the theory of folktale developed by Burkett is used here to understand the process taken by the superhero. For Burkett, the deepest deep structure of the tale would be a series of imperatives: get which means go out, ask, find out, fight for it, take, and run. This deepest structure is later developed by Johansen and Larsen into several steps.

For protagonist: Luck - a search - a find - a pursue - an overtaken - an attack - a win - a obtain - a possess.

Antagonist: Posses- hide - be found –flee –be overtaken -defend -lose -relinquish - back

These steps are simplified into four steps below:

The introductory lack – The hunt or quest – the struggle -the resolution.

Based on the theory, the protagonist departs his journey for his or her awareness of his lack, meanwhile, the antagonist or the opponent of the protagonist either human or non-human is depicted by its possess. The story ends with the empowerment of the protagonist to the possession. The possession here is illustrated as power possession.

elementary sequence narrative elements in literal and in metaphorical stories passed by the hero to obtain happiness or survival. It is understood that to obtain happiness and to survive, both the protagonist and antagonist have certain qualities. Generally, it must be an adult, fast, cunning, and strong, passes welldeveloped hunting and fighting techniques. The process of growing up and learning to hunt illustrates that one has to qualify oneself to execute certain complex actions. Generally, the action involves a process that realizes a transition from one state to another state, for example from lack to search. human stories, human action is tied to the question of guilt and responsibility, and therefore also the sanction punishment. For this reason, the problem involving action has been the subject of much discussion throughout the history of our culture.

## **4.** The process of becoming a superhero

As seen in the film Objects, becoming a superhero is not something intended by the hero, yet it is given power after the character passes the process and reaches certain qualities based on discipline. The table below shows the steps of disciplinebased qualities characters go through to power. The decent obtain protagonist passes fewer steps meanwhile arrogant immoral problematic protagonist should pass several processes to obtain power that makes them survive and obtain happiness.

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No	Steps of	Ironman	Spiderman
	becoming a		
	superhero		
1	Posses		
2	Hide		
3	Be found		
4	Flee		
5	Be overtaken		
6	Defend		
7	Lose		
8	Relinquish		
9	Lack		$\sqrt{}$
10	Search		$\sqrt{}$
11	Find		
12	Pursue		$\sqrt{}$
13	Overtake		$\sqrt{}$
14	Attack		
15	Win	√	V
16	Obtain	√	V
17	Possess		

The table above shows that heroic characters have a different background which can be categorized into two conditions namely the character who lacks power and the character who already possess power. This category is elaborated below:

1. The powerful Heroes

Ironman begins by showing a powerful character. Before becoming an Ironman, Toni Stack was a proud, smart, billionaire born to a rich weapon industry owner. Yet, his parents died in a car accident. Since he was four years old, he had had a bright idea of developing his parent company. Then, he graduated summa Cumlaude from MIT, the very best university. At 21 years old he takes over and invents company revolutionary weapons. This allows him to have a more close relationship with the government, especially the military. Below is a quote narrated at the very beginning of the movie:

Tony Stark. Visionary. Genius. American patriot. Even from an early age, the son of legendary

developer Howard weapons Stark quickly stole the spotlight with his brilliant and unique mind. At age four, he built his first circuit board. At age six, his first engine. And at 17, he graduated summa cum laude from MIT.

[...] Today, Tony Stark has changed the face of the weapons industry by ensuring freedom and protecting America and her interests around the globe. As liaison to **Stark Industries** 

Based on the theory, he is seen in the position of **possession** based on his affluence, power, and influence. Despite his money and power, Tony has a very bad attitude. He is an old single, notorious adventurous playboy with a big ego and other personal demons. For this attitude, the movie illustrated his absence during a ceremony in which he was awarded the Apogee Award for his invention, visionary, invention, American by the Government. Instead, he was spending his money in a casino surrounded by girls and does not seem to appreciate the award when it was presented by a colonel military person. He gives it to a casino girl. Below are a conversation between Colonel presented the award in the casino and Tony who is playing casino.

if I presented you with an award, you'd be deeply honored. Of course, I'd be deeply honored. And it's you, that's great. So when do we do it? It's right here. Here you go. There it is. That was easy. Here you go. There it is. That was easy.

I'm so sorry. Yeah, it's okay.

The dialogue between Stack and Colonel illustrates that Stack did not care about the award. However, his greedy, adventurous playboy, arrogant blockades

Ironman to obtain the superpower. It means that wealth is depicted as limited power that does not satisfy the ambition of Ironman to be a powerful wealthy human being. His greed for the weapon competitive industries led him to fly to Afghanistan. Furthermore, their bad attitude is categorized as **hiding** because they hide their power for their selfish enjoyment. Then, he departs for a journey to Afghanistan, a place where he can enlarge his wealth during the war and obtain unlimited power, and superpower. The superpower is blessed and given by the most powerful resource. Yet, he traveled to Afghanistan to empower his wealth, yet he was found by his enemy. Tony Stark tries to **flee**, but just before he could accomplish their plan, he is overtaken again and they lose and then relinguish.

The signification of the **relinquishment** of their power in Tony Stark when he had to witness his best partner and mentor Professor Yinsen sacrifice his life and the abolishment of the reactor power they secretly build. Tony Stark started from zero to build his power without his fellow mentor. In this state, he became lacking for he put aside all the knowledge that empowered him and made him so

arrogant.

He began to search, find and pursue then attack and then win and later possess again even more super power possession. But in the end, transformed into a better personality and become a superhero. Tony Stark made access to his powerful source of power after releasing their ego, selfishness, and personality. They emptied themselves from claiming wealth and knowledge, and free themselves from claiming and possession. This condition is understood as a lack. And indeed, the movies show that luck is the gate to the source of power and the beginning of superpower heroes.

## 2. The powerless heroes

Spiderman is only an ordinary coward, a humble, poor, but honest orphan endowed with superpower qualities. This condition of **lack** is illustrated by his lack of parents to protect and inherit his wealth. He grows up with his uncle Benjamin and Aunty May who have a middle-income living in a Maryland He is a skinny coward man suburb. victim of bullied as shown in the movie script shown below:

It crunches into Peter's nose and he

crumples to the

Pavement in this alley in the city.

Three high school punks commence

pounding the crap out of him.

Flash Thompson is the leader, he's seventeen, good-looking, body of a twenty-eight-year-old.

Flash

You do not talk to her! How many Times I gotta tell you that? Do you Listen when I talk? Hey! I asked You have a question! Do you listen when I'm talking to you?!

This enrages Flash; he punches Peter in the ribs. Peter groans in Pain.

Flash

Next time you're gonna pay, puny Parker, you are gonna pay. Peter spits out some blood.

The other two punks laugh, they find Peter kind of amusing. This upset flashes even more, he picks up a garbage can and is about to bring it down on Peter's head when a voice from behind stops him.

The quote above describes the lack of condition experienced by Peter. Yet, his sincere acceptance of his luck signifies his humble, patient, decent character. Instead, being aware of his lack has guided him to eagerly search knowledge. His attitude allows him to **find** a way to **pursue** it, to exercise his ability through some tests of life he has to face.

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Peter is a bright kid. He doesn't have many friends. He is ostracized for his interest in science. [...].

Peter is defiant. He thinks they are the real losers. They'll be flipping burgers while he's discovering the cure to cancer. We'll see who wins in the long run.

He wears his isolation like a badge... with an air of superiority.

Despite this Spiderman had always faced his fear and anger. Mentally he is trained to face his biggest enemy, namely himself before he **won** and reached the highest step namely **possessing** the superpower energy and becoming superhuman.

## 5. Source Power Of Superhero Narrated in the Movies

Power is the main element transforming an ordinary man into a superhuman. It allows them to obtain survival, happiness, and control over others. This power is obtained after passing several hard steps. Yet, the hardship of passing all the tests is based on three modalities namely will, knowledge, and ability. These three modalities qualify independent human action (Aristotle). The two superhero stories prove that the will, knowledge, and ability indeed generate the finding of superpower sources.

The will to act has to have arisen. The two movies show the different reasons that generate their will to act. Tony Stack is generated by his will to have more power due to his feeling of luck, and Peter is generated by his luck condition and his will to a girl, Sarah Jane. The will to power is motivated by the awareness of luck. The two movies emphasize that the condition of luck is significant in the of becoming superhuman. According to Johansen & Larsen (92), the awareness of lack moves a hero to search and hunt, and without the realization of luck, a hero never departs to take action. In moral and philosophical law, the definition of human action is tied to the

question of guilt and responsibility. Peter's guilt of his powerless to attract Sarah Jane's attention. Tony Stack's inability to save American soldiers and Hansen's life. The two felt responsible to act.

The will to act is not a sufficient condition for acting. Peter and Tony Stack have to know what to do. According to Larsen, one has to process the modality knowledge. In human society, the qualification is acquired through a learning process to receive knowledge. Yet, many protagonists have prove their worth to receive knowledge, either by personal virtue or through actions springing from those merits. Tony Stack shows his merits by terminating his weapon industry whose production has killed many armies. Peter in Spiderman shows his good nature through his love and obedience to his uncle and auntie. Possessing certain moral, intellectual, and physical properties such as kindness, cleverness, obedience, and courage acquire the hero to receive assistance. In the two movies. knowledge does not appear in the intellectual alone but it also shows in the form of moral and spiritual intelligence. This is parallel to Haidar Bagir's view that human is born in fitrah which means that human is equipped with knowledge. the teacher helps them to open and unveil the knowledge within themselves.

Yet knowledge is not sufficient. The ability must be obtained to act. Yet, the ability has many aspects. According to Larsen, ability in folktales is often strictly instrumental such as property that enables the owner to solve a particular problem. In myth, it is a magical object or magical spell, or religious verse. This means that the nature of ability is not obtained but it is given. Likewise, in modern superhero movies ability is shown through the magical and beyond invention in technological development. Peter's ability looks accidental and

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unexpected. He is ready to work hard to have a better life, but it is his destiny that the spider comes to him and bites him. It is beyond his thought. Unlike the professor in the research room, he has been struggling for years to gain the spider's gen, yet none bites him.

Peter clicks off another shot. The spider draws closer, headed for the spot between Peter's thumb and forefinger. Its hairy legs come in for a landing on Peter's pink flesh and-

PETER

Ow!!!

He shakes his hand, hard, to flip the spider off of him. The spider flies off and lands on the floor.

Peter looks at his hand. There are two tiny red marks where the spider sank its fangs into his skin. Peter bends down and looks at the spider on the floor.

It's dead.

On the huge electron microscope display screens, swirling strands of DNA molecules combine, detach, and recombine.

Unlike Peter, Tony Stack also accidentally found the electromagnetic in the cave. The similarities are that they found the power within their bodies by combining the power with their body. Another similarity is that their power seems to compete with technological development, and their power is always far beyond technological development. Peter is juxtaposing the professor from the research laboratory, Tony Stack juxtaposing with his industrial weapon. The two movies show that ability is a superpower never abandoning humanity element, and keep emphasizing the anthropocentric of human ability.

6. Becoming Superhero

From the above analysis, it can be seen that becoming superhuman requires not only extraordinary power from the environment which triggers the superhero to have the will to act but also from inside by obtaining knowledge. However,

knowledge here does not mean the intellectual achievement only which gains through learning science and technology, but it extends to moral, spiritual, and emotional quality. Peter is 17 years old when he was bitten by the spider, yet he has gained moral maturity. In the two movies, moral and intellectual maturity are recognized by first the surrender of the hero from claiming the knowledge and ability endowed to them. They free themselves from claiming by humble behavior to show the consistency of luck. They are free from the intervention of any other power. The definition of identity proposed by Cogan limits the superhero by its physical appearance.

Unlike a hero who is a descendant of a god or goddess, a superhero seems to open the possibility to all levels of human beings to be a superhero. Superhero is more democratic and all people have an opportunity to be a superhero. Tony Stack is not a descendant of a royal family, so is Peter. They are ordinary

human beings.

The depiction of ability which is a accessed outside themselves however seems to dehumanize the characters. As can be seen that not only does the transformation marks their power but also their appearance which turns them into non-human identity. The adoption of an animal or monster identity seems to diminish their human identity into an animal identity rather than elevate them into the highest human supernatural identity such as in the folktale. Moreover, generally human is considered to have a higher level than animal. Spiderman and Ironman are using non-human identities. implies the significance technology and the imagination and the hope of people to the advantage of technology. However, all the movies show that none of God's power interferes with their power source. Unlike the narration of powerful spiritual humans from the holy script such as Moses, and

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David who are blessed by God with superpowers, the superheroes gain their power from their universe and science.

The second problem that can be identified in the analysis is that most of the characters should pass a test to gain superpowers. This test is not an easy one thev have undergone difficulties and miseries. Yet, all tests shown in the movie have one goal namely to empty the person of any powerful ego in which he may claim the becoming power is his self-attainment. Those who already have power are shown in front of their eyes that they are neither powerless nor hopeless like Spiderman who cannot help his parent. In addition, those who were powerless were either depicted as orphans or poor. This depiction implies that superpower only can be received by open those who are and empty themselves of ego.

### C. CONCLUSION

The superhero is more democratic and open to anyone to be a superhero. Becoming a superhero requires a long and complicated process. So far, the of identification superheroes recognized by their physical identity. yet, the process to be in that physical appearance requires a long process such as emptying an individual self from any other constrained power to fill a new energy. Therefore, superpower character who already possesses capacity undertakes certain procedures to destroy the previous energy. The already-taken power is described as negative and evil. This destructive power is illustrated to steer the character to have corrupt, wicked, immoral behavior. or Meanwhile, the hero who is described orphan, unoccupied by any power, and worthless is morally tested to build his inner power. The complete inner capacity elevates them to the next level namely filled with an extraordinary power. Those who pass the test are bestowed and blessed with a discovery of powerful tools.

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