The Narratives of Religion, Sacrifice, and Myth in the Marvel Cinematic Universe.

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Abstract

An investigation into how the popularity of modern cinematic superheroes, specifically those found within the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), can be understood on a psychological basis through their similarities with more traditional deities, and how they can even go so far as to act as a replacement. Utilising the psychological theories, primarily those of Freud and Jung, this thesis will examine the way in which these superheroes not only embody godhood through their superhuman powers, but also defy it through their psychologically human nature.

Contents

<u>Abbreviation Key.</u>

MCU – Marvel Cinematic Universe.

S.H.I.E.L.D. – Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement, and Logistics Division.

E.D.I.T.H. – Even Dead, I'm the Hero.

Introduction

Superheroes have been a cornerstone of American pop culture since their creation in the 1930s. While their popularity has fluctuated, it has always endured on some level throughout the remainder of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. Superhero films are at the forefront of the contemporary level of popularity, as evidenced by the influx of superhero films being released, as well as the number of which pass the one-billion-dollar mark at the worldwide box office. At the centre of this is Disney's Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), whose current 2021 plans include four films and six Disney+ series. However, it is important to note that the concept of a shared universe is nothing new, with both Marvel and DC emphasising the way in which the universe of one of their heroes is the universe of them all. Cinematically, the shared monster universe of the mid-twentieth century is also evidence of the cinematic universe prior to the MCU. In such universes, famed characters could cross-over, meet other characters within each medium, and team-up to become a group, or fight each other in epic showdowns. To give a comic book example, the Avengers and the Justice League of America are always shown to be capable of dealing with threats which are too much for individual characters to deal with, such as the Avengers fighting Ultron, a super-intelligent robot who has the capability to control all forms of technology and command them to do what he wants.

When the concept of the shared comic universe was created, they did not just create a team of superheroes, but a group that can be likened to the pantheons of gods found in Norse and Greek mythology. This similarity between gods and superheroes has not gone unnoticed, with many claiming there is a relationship between the secularisation of society, and the increase in the popularity of superheroes. According to research performed by the American Religious Identification survey, which shows that the number of self-identifying Christians in America has declined by sixteen percent between 1990 and 2017, and those identifying as non-religious has tripled in size (As quoted in Scott, Eugene. 2017). This is an important point to note, as this is around the time that superhero films have started to flourish and multiply, starting one year prior to the study with *Batman* (Directed by Tim Burton, 1989), which, at the time was a critical and commercial success, becoming the fastest film to make $100

million dollars at the box office, doing so in only ten days (Hughes, David. p.42, 2003). Despite this, the boom of superhero films did not truly begin until the release of *X-Men* (Directed by Bryan Singer, 2000). The American Religious Identification survey in conjunction with the increase in superhero film releases can be seen as an indication of the way superhero films replace traditional religion.

This thesis will focus on three areas surrounding the relationship between superheroes and how they represent modern ideas and concepts with regards to religion. Likewise, the thesis will focus on America, as the fact that superhero media products are American-made makes it essential to focus on them within an American context. Furthermore, this thesis will focus primarily on Christianity, as, despite their likeness to polytheistic gods, the aforementioned focus on America also makes it essential to focus on the most commonly adhered to religion within that country to best understand the popularity of superheroes. The first section will focus on the modern representation of God, and the way that Thanos (Josh Brolin) acts as a prime example of a complex depiction of God as both good and evil in varying ways. In *Avengers: Infinity War* (Directed by Anthony Russo and Joe Russo, 2018), Thanos represents God in many ways, and the film does this by displaying his search for omnipotence, a classic trait of God, his murder of his favourite child Gamora (Zoe Saldana), and through his following, the Black Order, who heavily resemble a form of radical religious group. Likewise, in relation to him being depicted as a hero, this is done by both framing him cinematically as a hero, as well as putting him through what Joseph Campbell calls 'The Hero's Journey', or, as he put it, the Monomyth (p.23a, 2008), with both of these phrases being used interchangeably throughout this thesis. Campbell's theory is a comprehensive guide to the physical, emotional and mental journey that the hero undergoes throughout mythological tales. Although restrictive in terms of what the Hero's Journey is and is not, the theory of the Hero's Journey has been shown to be a common format when creating modern mythology, whether that be consciously through the book itself, such as its use in creating *Star Wars* (Directed by George Lucas, 1977) (Yorke, J. p.53, 2013), or unconsciously through the implications that the book posits on the relevance of the archetypes in relation to mythology. Furthermore, the Hero's Journey is also important to address Thanos with to consider how much he, as the protagonist of the film, adheres to the theory, and how much he refutes it.

The second section will focus on the way in which superheroes in the MCU are represented as both gods and humans, and the ways in which they become beloved by audiences as a result, with a distinct focus on Tony Stark/Iron Man. This section will focus on the argument that superheroes are an amalgamation of humans and gods, particularly looking at the way in which there is a spectrum of the two personas, psychologically and physically. The reason for examining Stark/Iron Man is firstly because he is the longest serving cast member of the MCU, featuring in ten MCU films, the majority of which explore these personas. The second reason for focusing on Stark/Iron Man is that his personas are the most easily defined, while still blending into each other. To take an example to expand on this, one common cinematographic technique that is used surrounding Stark/Iron Man throughout the films is the act of the camera showing Stark's face underneath his armour when it is the Stark persona speaking, and the camera showing him with his mask on when it is Iron Man speaking. The difference between the two being that Stark tends to make quips and give one-liners, whereas Iron Man tends to make more noble sentiments and engage the villains on a more serious level. This helps display the spectrum of identity of the human Stark and the godly Iron Man, with the former having the human sense of humour, while Iron Man takes the prospects of heroism seriously. Similarly, this section, in relation to Stark in particular, will focus on the concept of vulnerability. God is represented as an invincible entity, and so, as representing the human part of the character, Stark is by contrast marked by his relationship with the concept of human vulnerability, both in terms of being physically vulnerable, and emotionally vulnerable. Furthermore, it is also important to look at how these two forms of vulnerability intersect and interact with each other.

The final section will focus on the embodiment of God in relation to the concept of the family, as displayed in the *Guardians of the Galaxy* films, as well as those featuring the Guardians themselves. Throughout the films one central theme that permeates the Guardians is that of 'family', with many of the protagonists discussing their issues with their biological families, such as the death of Peter Quill's/Star-Lord's (Chris Pratt) mother, Meredith, at the start of the first film, or the death of Drax's (Dave Bautista) wife and child at the hands of Ronan the Accuser (Lee Pace) to give two examples. This later coincides with the fact that Peter Quill's/Star-Lord's true father

is revealed in the second film to be Ego the Living Planet (Kurt Russell), a Celestial, the Marvel equivalent of a god. This displays the concept, not only of God as the father, but also shows the way in which God is dead, as Ego's death after attempting to mould the universe in his image shows. Likewise, as Quill is saved by his surrogate father, Yondu (Michael Rooker), who appropriately states; "he may have been your father boy, but he wasn't your daddy", showing that God has been replaced by other figures, namely superheroes. This section will focus on the more recently malleable concept of the family, and will examine the way in which the traditional nuclear family has become a less relevant institution, allowing for families to become less stringently defined for the benefit of the individuals involved. Likewise, it will also evaluate the impact and representation of abusive parental relationships and parental abandonment on individuals, and how this depicts the idea of a negative representation of a familial relationship, and how this can similarly be reflected in a relationship with God.

It can be said that there are many reasons for the idea that superheroes are a replacement for religion, but first the distinction between Marvel and DC heroes needs to be made clear, as this thesis will focus on Marvel heroes, as opposed to DC. The difference between the heroes of Marvel and DC is the representation of the heroes in relation to godhood, with DC creating more heroes akin to monotheistic gods, in the sense of them being near-infallible in a physical sense. Marvel, on the other hand, split the majority of their heroes into their human and heroic forms, with the hero often being depicted as invulnerable, while the human harbouring psychological vulnerabilities, and the heroic persona being used as a means to compensate for the human faults. For example, in *Avengers Assemble* (Directed by Joss Whedon, 2012) Bruce Banner (Mark Ruffalo) confesses to attempting suicide after getting depression as a result of his alter ego by shooting himself in the mouth, which the Hulk then rejects by spitting the bullet back out. This displays the way in which the human sides of the Marvel heroes are more prone to death and vulnerabilities that their heroic sides are not affected by, and likewise, that the godly superhero identities protect against these vulnerabilities. However, it is important to note that these two aspects of the personality are more a spectrum than a clean-cut split, with both sides driving towards blending into each other to an extent, leading the characters towards individuation, the explanation of which will be divulged later.

Another reason for the increase in the popularity of superheroes is the loss of faith in America, and the American way of life. Throughout the twentieth century, there are a number of examples of moments where the idealized America that had always been presented to the world became exposed as untrue. These include the Great Depression, the Vietnam War, and Watergate. To expand upon one of these examples, the Watergate scandal, wherein US Republican President Richard Nixon was proved to have wiretapped the Democrat party headquarters, and subsequently resigned as a result of the scandal, emphasises the loss of belief in the American identity. For the American public, to have the highest political authority of their country be revealed as committing criminal acts, as well as lying about it, was a shock, as the office of president is not unlike the position of a God in that they are both figures of authority, and, in regards to all examples of presidents at the time of writing, give a paternal figure to the American public. This can be exemplified through the way in which a version of Captain America that was published at the time of Watergate, became 'disillusioned' as a result, and if the hero designed to be the embodiment of all that is great about America can lose faith, then, according to Roz Kaveney, the American public can be felt as doing the same (p.157, 2008). These events have helped display why Christianity has been on the decline, as it shows how the authority figures they know cannot be trusted in the way they once were, which, in turn, becomes reflected upon the ones who have not let them down. This left the public wanting some kind of replacement that they feel they can believe in more without doubt. This has led to the increased popularity of superheroes in modern day America, as superheroes, as the protagonists of their own tales, give more details to the audience that leave them with a better idea of the true nature of the character. This openness has allowed superheroes to gain and maintain a level of popularity that reaches back to their early days in World War II.

Superheroes began and became popular during the Second World War, with Captain America being the figurehead of the war from then-called Timely Comics, later renamed Marvel comics, back in 1941. Acting not as the godly Superman of DC, who dealt with aliens and issues of higher magnitude, that were ultimately symbolic of WWII, Captain America was shown as fighting the Nazis in Europe, a move that brought superheroes not only to a human level, but to a real-world arena, allowing

humanity a place in defeating evil, with Kaveney supporting this by stating that 'at the most patriotic times of the Second World War, superheroes were shown as participating in the war effort, not replacing it' (p.20). This was the first step in showing superheroes as heroes of the real world; as opposed to the impossible powers of Superman, Captain America is depicted as having heightened physical strength, a good moral compass, and the love of America on his side, all of which are attainable by any everyday human, and making superheroes appear as an attainable standard of humanity, more so than traditional religious gods. This example displays the way in which Marvel comics do their best to bring superhero narratives into the real world to help them connect with their audiences better. This also shows how, despite comic book's best attempts to ingrain themselves in reality, it is not an essential element to garnering their popularity but does help to draw the audience in superficially.

The appeal of superheroes goes beyond Marvel storylines being a simulacrum of real-world events, with a number of superhero tropes that allow them to be represented in a way that enables a more realistic representation, designated through their human aspects. One example of this is the trope of parental issues. Many superheroes struggle to deal with the trauma of dead, absent, or abusive parents, with very few superheroes being a part of the traditional nuclear family, regardless of which house of comics they belong to. As a result, many of them attempt to seek out a replacement father figure, exemplifying what is known in Jungian psychology as 'father hunger.' Father hunger, according to Toby Reynolds, is the seeking of a masculine parental need that the child, regardless of age, potentially continuing into adulthood, successfully or not (p.77, 2018). Classic examples of father hunger within superhero media include Dick Grayson/Robin seeking a father in Bruce Wayne/Batman, or Peter Parker/Spider-Man (Tom Holland) looking to Tony Stark/Iron Man (Robert Downey Jr.) in the MCU as a father figure. The seeking of a father figure, often depicts itself as a search for guidance, a mentor who can take the young boy from his early life through to manhood, with the father acting as the 'initiating priest through whom the young being passes on into the larger world' (Campbell, J. p.115). Likewise, this is also why an absent father figure can be seen as harmful to a youth, as it leaves them without a guide in the ways of the world. However, an important point to note about this is that the child does not need the figure to be male, they only need provide that which is

expected from a father, such as the example of The Ancient One (Tilda Swinton) in *Doctor Strange* (Directed by Scott Derrickson, 2016).

The concept of father hunger is also an aspect of Jungian psychology that will be utilised and explained further throughout this thesis, as its relevance to superheroes cannot be understated, particularly with relation to the religious connotations of superheroes. This can also be related to the decline of monotheism in the sense that God is seen as both a life teacher, and an absent, paternal figure, and so audiences can see themselves in the place of the superhero in the way that they too feel abandoned by a higher power. This also shows how father hunger can connect both Christianity and superheroes, as both have the potential to satiate this desire for a father figure. Furthermore, superheroes began during the WWII, at a time where many children were left fatherless as many of the adult men had gone to fight the war in Europe, which is shown further by the filmmakers of the New Hollywood movement, who grew up during WWII. Relating back to Captain America, this could be seen as a way of children still being able to have a paternal relationship with an idealized version of how the children of the time could think of their fathers when they were unable to see them physically.

As Captain America's propaganda-based origins display, superheroes are an American invention, which is why it is important to study them in an American context, because if one can understand pop culture where it is most at home, then one can look at why that popularity is or is not shared on a global scale. This is because if the conditions to create the popularity exists on one part of the globe, but not another, that can explain the popularity in the former area, but not the latter. Likewise, America is also a key location that needs to be studied when examining religious belief and superheroes is America because the majority of superhero stories are set in locations that are primarily found in America, or based on American cities, most notably the Marvel Universe New York, which Grant Morrison claims that despite its own unique history, keeps in touch with the real world through the contemporary fashions of the day (p.220, 2011). This blurring between reality and fiction provides the audience with a tether through which they can more easily become enveloped in the stories, and thus, help increase and maintain their popularity.

Similar to the focus on America, this thesis will also focus on Christianity as the key example of religion. This is not to claim that other religions are not relevant, but as the thesis will focus on America, and Christianity is the most prevalent religion in America, it is relevant to maintain a focus on Christianity. According to the PEW Research Center's study on Christian belief, sixty-five percent of all Americans are Christian, denoting a majority, however, this is down twelve percent since 2009, with those not affiliated with any religion increasing from seventeen to twenty-six percent over the same period of time (2019). This shows how, despite Christianity's maintained religious dominance in America, it is declining, and as a result, it must be understood how modern superhero media provides the same satiation of needs and psychological fulfilment that was previously sated by Christianity. Despite this, it is entirely possible that Americans are not less religious, but merely have started expressing their religiosity in different forms to those previously as a result of new forms that fulfil their needs that were previously fulfilled by religion. Heroes can be claimed to be a perfect example of a religious replacement, and can come in many forms in contemporary society, not least in the form of superheroes. Allison and Goethals claim that heroes are popular due to their ability to provide 'wisdom, meaning, hope, inspiration, and personal growth' (p.188, 2016), all of which, it can be said, are found within religion and superheroes. While Allison and Goethals were not speaking explicitly of superheroes, and were more talking of heroes in general, superheroes can be said to provide all of the aforementioned qualities as well, and just as much as religion. Combining the reduced religiosity of Americans with the qualities heroes provide displays the way in which superheroes can act as a form of replacement for Christianity.

This thesis will also utilise a psychoanalytical approach to films, using the various works of Carl Jung and Sigmund Freud. The reason for this is because superheroes are a form of art that need to connect with their audience for fear of alienating them, specifically on a psychological level, because if they do not, then they, like all forms of cinema, will lack the popularity that can be created by an unconscious connection with the audience. This is accomplished through the way in which cinema gives form to Archetypes. The Archetypes, as described by John Izod, are;

The contents of the collective unconscious. They are not inherited ideas, but inherited modes of psychic functioning. Until activated, they are forms without content; when activated they control patterns of behaviour. The centres of energy around which ideas, images, affects and myths cohere (2001, as quoted in Reynolds, T. N. p.85).

This encompassing description of archetypes being used here is important in that it displays how archetypes, can always persevere, and show how certain imagery can continue as part of the zeitgeist, while others may not, or, more likely, become replaced by others. Furthermore, archetypes, in being formless, and only being given form through imagery, such as through dreams, religion, or popular culture (Reynolds, T.N. p.90), enables them to persist in becoming essential not only in the creation of popular imagery, but also the fluid transformations that come to the aforementioned imagery as time goes by. This likening is important towards this thesis as it shows how, in a broad sense, cinema can appeal to people as an alternative to religion. Furthermore, in a narrower sense, when taken in tandem with specific archetypes, most notably the aforementioned father archetype, this comparison can be used to understand the appeal or lack thereof surrounding the MCU films.

Another reason for the use of Jungian psychology to analyse the MCU, or more importantly, film in general, is its emphasis on symbolism over the pleasure emphasis of Freudianism. Film is first and foremost a visual art form, and as such, does not necessarily need to give pleasure to be appreciated. This is not to say that the other aspects are not relevant, particularly in this thesis, where superhero films do tend to give pleasure, but this side is less necessary to creating an enjoyable film, whereas cinema is inherently visual, and cannot exist without visuals, specifically symbols. Jungian theory is also relevant in that, in regards to archetype theory, Jung claimed that archetypes are formless, and that they only are given form by external sources, with cinema being an example. This is supported by Helena Bassil-Morozow, who states that an 'archetype is an irrepresentable idea, whereas archetypal images are concrete realisations of archetypes in dreams, fantasies, myths, etc.' (p.54, 2017). This shows how important it is to study cinema with a Jungian framework, as the idea of archetypal imagery activating the archetypes, in conjunction with the necessity of images in cinema, can be seen as a psychological basis for cinema itself. In this way,

Jungian theory is also relevant in that both the Hero's Journey and archetype theory work on a similar principle of numerous fluid images and roles that are fulfilled in a variety of ways, in this case, specifically within narratives. This is also why Campbell's previously mentioned Hero's Journey theory is also being used, as it draws heavily on the myths which were used to inform Jung's theories, as well as the way in which it is informed by Jung's own archetype theory, with frequent references to Jung throughout the text. Similarly, psychological explanations of art can be used towards art as a means of uncovering meanings unknown to the artist, as Freud claimed that 'Kindly nature has given the artist the ability to express his most secret mental impulses, which are hidden even from himself, by means of the works he creates' (as quoted in Blum, Harold P. pp.1409 – 1410, 2001). Through this description, Freud claims that art is an expression of unconscious impulses, which is essential to the study of film as it implies that not all film is the result of careful planning and conscious thought; unconscious thought is also necessary to the creation of film. This means that if this unconscious impulse is present throughout the minds of many, then this adds an explanation as to why some films are more popular and beloved than others, a prospect that is supported by Skip Dine Young, who claims that 'the *conscious intentions* of writers and directors do not limit psychodynamic interpretations; it is always possible that *unconscious associations* are having an influence on artistic creation' (p.27, 2012). This can help to explain how films can be artistically and psychologically coherent, without the directors' conscious intention to create a film as refined as they create.

<u>The contemporary representation of gods, using Thanos in *Avengers: Infinity War*</u>
<u>and *Avengers: Endgame* as a case study</u>

Superhero media has long had the tradition of creating villains that are designed to be understandable and likewise be represented in a messianic manner that allows them to be seen to rival the strength and capabilities of the hero. Early examples of this include General Zod (Terence Stamp) from *Superman II* (Directed by Richard Lester, 1980), who famously demanded in the film that others "Kneel before Zod" in a way that invokes Christian imagery, mirroring God's request that humanity worship him. One recent example of this is Thanos in *Avengers: Infinity War*. Introduced in the mid-credits scene of *Avengers Assemble*, Thanos has been built up by Marvel Studios to be the greatest villain the MCU has ever seen, waiting until the right moment to gain the Infinity Stones, through which he could achieve his goal. While his goal was different in the comics, that of wanting to win the love of Lady Death, his goal in the MCU is to kill half the universe with the intention of allowing for everyone left to have the resources to live to a survivable extent, as opposed to everyone struggling to live with the resources available. However, one unexpected aspect of Thanos came when he was made the central character of the film, becoming the hero of his own tale. In an interview, Joe Russo elaborated that the purpose of this was the novelty of putting a film in the point-of-view of the villain, as well as informing that Thanos was on his 'hero's quest' (Fraley, Jason. 2018), which would also be an equivalent of what Campbell called the 'Hero's Journey'. This is better embodied by David Bordwell's claim that novelty within cinema has 'always been strongly controlled by aesthetic norms' (p.174, 2006). Through the application of Campbell's theory of the Hero's Journey, or Monomyth as he also called it, both of which will be used interchangeably throughout this thesis, Thanos becomes framed in a way that displays him as a hero.

Campbell's theory of the Monomyth states that 'the standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero is a magnification of the formula represented in the rites of passage: *separation – initiation – return*: which might be named the nuclear unit of the monomyth' (p.23b). Elaborated into seventeen substages, including the Refusal of the Call, where the hero, despite being called to adventure, refuses it for whatever reason, and the Ultimate Boon, at which point, the hero

procures something that will be essential in the remainder of their journey, Campbell's theory states that all mythic heroes undergo this process as a representation of the journeys people undergo in real life. Campbell's Monomyth is important in relation to this thesis through its grounding in relevant psychological theories, such as Jungian archetypes in myth, and child/parent relationships from both Freudian and Jungian perspectives. Campbell's Monomyth has been commonly used in regards to many examples of twentieth-century storytelling, to the point where many Hollywood screenwriters will utilise it to write their scripts, including in the aforementioned case of *Star Wars.* While no confirmation has been given to the active use of the Hero's Journey in writing *Infinity War*, the film can still be analysed in relation to it to consider both the unconscious aspects of the theory itself, as well as the way in which the theory has become common in contemporary Hollywood storytelling. Similarly, it has been used in relation to Thanos in *Infinity War* as an example of how the template of the Monomyth can be applied beyond the expected hero characters, and applied to other characters. By enacting Campbell's Monomyth, as well as various cinematic techniques that have been established and repeated throughout the entirety of the preceding parts of the MCU, Thanos is framed as the hero of *Infinity War* through his undertaking of the Hero's Journey, despite having a goal that is evil in nature, that of genocide.

Similarly, the representation of Thanos as a god, specifically a god found in Christianity, is done through his loyal following, known as the Black Order, who claim that "even in death, you have become Children of Thanos," his utilisation of the Infinity Stones through the Infinity Gauntlet which likens his will to a 'hand of God,' his sacrifice of his child at the top of a hill for what he perceives as a greater good, and finally, his perception of the superheroes, who can be likened to gods as well, as an obstruction to his goal of omnipotence, in a manner not dissimilar to Christianity's attempted eradication of other religions. In these regards, Thanos can be seen most as a representation of God as depicted in the Bible, the primary religious text of Christianity, a religion which has been coming under scrutiny for many years for a variety of reasons while still maintaining high belief rates. It is important to iterate here that the acts of Christians, and likewise the religious followers of other religions, do not always necessarily reflect the true intentions, wants and needs of the deity of which the religion claims to worship. As such, Thanos' Godly representation may not

be true to all Christian beliefs of God, but only specific evangelical Christian beliefs of God. When the religious and psychological viewpoints, along with Campbell's Monomyth, are mixed together, it becomes possible to be able to perceive Thanos as both a villain and a hero.

Before investigating the specific ways in which Thanos can be perceived as a god and a hero, it is important to emphasise the differences between the two Thanos's found in *Infinity War* and *Avengers: Endgame* (Directed by Anthony Russo and Joe Russo, 2019), that of the Thanos of the main timeline seen in the MCU, which is the one found in *Infinity War* and the start of *Endgame*, and the Thanos of the past, specifically 2014, found in *Endgame*. Herein, both Thanos's will be referred to by the film in which they are respectively found. While the Thanos of *Infinity War* is the same Thanos that has been existent in the main timeline of the MCU films, the Thanos of *Endgame* is one of an alternate timeline that comes about as a result of the Avengers attempts to undo the original Thanos' actions committed in *Infinity War*, that which was officially termed the Decimation. The Decimation was Thanos' use of the Infinity Stones in a successful attempt to kill half the population of the universe for the purpose of ensuring that those who remained would have enough resources to survive. These two versions of the same character are caused by the fact that at the beginning of *Endgame*, *Infinity War* Thanos is killed at the beginning by Thor (Chris Hemsworth) after being found on his haven on an unnamed planet and having discovered that he destroyed the Infinity Stones, the only hope the Avengers had of undoing The Decimation. Later, after discovering the secret to time travel, the Avengers travel throughout time with the hope of claiming the Infinity Stones prior to their collection in *Infinity War*, so that they can undo the Decimation. In doing so, they accidentally alert an earlier incarnation of Thanos to the events of *Infinity War* and *Endgame,* notably his success and death. He subsequently resolves to use the very same form of time travel to travel to the present day of the MCU and stop the Avengers from undoing the Decimation.

With the knowledge of how both versions of Thanos exist, it must now be discussed how they differ in terms of their representations as hero and villain. The reason for this is because the way in which they are both represented can further allow them to

be separated into hero and villain, while both can be perceived as God. One way this is done is through the costume change he undergoes at the beginning of *Infinity War*. At the beginning of *Infinity War*, Thanos sheds his traditional comic-book armour to represent his transition from that of a warrior, to that of an adventurer, questing for the Infinity Stones. Similarly, in doing so, he abandons his warrior persona, opting instead to complete his mission of universal genocide, which he perceives as saving lives, without killing anyone who does not need to die. This is why, when fighting the Avengers and Guardians of the Galaxy, he does not kill any of them that are not necessary to completing his goal, trying to avoid doing so if he can. This is further shown by the fact that, despite it being established in *Guardians of the Galaxy* (Directed by James Gunn, 2014) that the Power Stone can be used to wipe out an entire planet, Thanos does not even use it to kill anyone, instead using it to incapacitate them, as shown by him knocking Drax (Dave Bautista), Peter Quill/Star-Lord (Chris Pratt) and Nebula (Karen Gillan) out using one energy wave from the Stone.

In contrast, the Thanos found in *Endgame* has yet to even properly begin his quest for the Infinity Stones, having only located, but not acquired, the Power Stone at the beginning of *Guardians of the Galaxy.* Likewise, he is wearing his armour in *Endgame*, as a continuation of the character from *Guardians of the Galaxy*, where he was also depicted as a villain through his alignment with the film's villain, Ronan the Accuser (Lee Pace), emphasising his role as a warrior and a villain. Furthermore, the first scene in *Endgame* displays Thanos casually wiping blood from his weapon, with the camera angled in a way that positions the cleaning of the weapon at the forefront of the shot to emphasise his warrior persona, as well as the shot looking up to give the impression of the threat that he poses. Similarly, the Thanos of *Infinity War* does not wield a weapon beyond the Infinity Stones in the Infinity Gauntlet. This shot is contrasted with the first scene of Thanos in *Infinity War*, where Thanos first appears in the background of the shot, which gives a perspective that makes him appear smaller than the other characters, contrasting with the perspective of him in *Endgame*, which shoots him alone, and taking up most of the shot. This shows how the Thanos of *Endgame* is a villain, in contrast with the heroic representation of *Infinity War*, as he is represented as being less passive towards the heroes, intentionally aiming to kill them. This is further shown during the final battle when, upon being restricted by

Wanda Maximoff/Scarlet Witch (Elizabeth Olsen), he orders his ship to rain fire on the battlefield, doing so with no regard of what happens to his own army. This disregard for his own army displays a drastic contrast to the Thanos of *Infinity War*, where he openly mourns the deaths of his Children, further displaying the differences in the two versions of Thanos.

With an understanding of how Thanos can be perceived as both a hero and a villain through the use of two different Thanos', it must now be analysed as to how he is represented in a manner that represents him as a hero, in spite of his evil desires and actions. Utilising Campbell's monomyth, in conjunction with Jungian archetypal theory, it can be observed that Thanos takes a similar Hero's Journey throughout *Infinity War* that Campbell described in the mid-twentieth century, with an emphasis on those archetypal aspects of Campbell's theory. However, it is important to note that the film does this by framing the film from Thanos's perspective, and how this is done will be elaborated later in this section. This then leads Thanos to become framed as the hero in the film. Similarly, as Thanos ultimately has inherently villainous goals, it must also be questioned as to how much the Hero's Journey applies to Thanos, and consequently, how applicable the Hero's Journey is to contemporary stories, particularly in regards to popular cinema. Likewise, it is possible to claim that *Infinity War* is an experimental film in that it attempts to manipulate the Hero's Journey to apply to a villain, in an attempt to question whether or not Thanos' actions are justified, which objectively, they are not. While focusing a film on a villain is nothing new or experimental in itself, the act of doing so within a form of popular culture such as superhero films is uncommon, mostly keeping with the genre expectations for the sake of continuing the style most accustomed with superhero films. Prior to discussing Thanos' Hero's Journey, it is important to relate it back to the concept of him as God through Jungian psychology in relation to the Hero's Journey, most notably discussing the Jungian idea of individuation through overcoming the archetypes to achieve an individuated self. Individuation is as John Izod claims, when the 'entire pantheon of archetypal energies is held in balance within the one over-arching dominant, the self' (p.143, 2001). As such, the Hero's Journey, in displaying Thanos' individuation, likens him to a god, as Jung claims that the Self 'might equally well be called the "God within us"' (as quoted in Izod, J. p.144). Furthermore, Thanos' Hero's Journey can further be seen as a quest for individuation through his perceived altruistic nature of his actions,

as supported by Bassil-Morozow and Luke Hockley, who cite that individuation is not just for the good of the individual, but for the good of the 'family, community and society' (p.9, 2017). However, it is important to note that while Thanos perceives his Hero's Journey as for the good of the universal society, his actual aims are objectively evil, in spite of his representation as a hero created through the use of his Hero's Journey. Furthermore, to avoid an exhaustive analysis of Thanos in relation to the Hero's Journey, only one subsection of each of the three sections will be discussed in relation to Thanos. Likewise, this restriction will also be applied to any sections which Thanos defies for the same reason.

Prior to discussing the Hero's journey, it is important to discuss the way in which earlier superhero movie villains are framed less dichotomously to the hero, and more like a self-perceived hero with aims similar to the hero. This is not to say that these villains are heroes, but that they are not so far removed from the ideology of the heroes as might be assumed, mostly as a result of them having heroic aims with villainous means, much like Thanos himself. As was previously mentioned, one of the earliest examples of this was General Zod from *Superman II*; however, a more recent example of this would be Ra's al Ghul (Liam Neeson) from The *Dark Knight* trilogy, most notably *Batman Begins* (Directed by Christopher Nolan, 2005). In *Batman Begins*, Ra's al Ghul, along with his organisation, the League of Shadows (known as the League of Assassins in other Batman media) have the primary goal of ending widespread corruption through the destruction of the societies of the world from the inside. Ra's al Ghul begins the film acting as a mentor to Bruce Wayne (Christian Bale) under the moniker of Henry Ducard, to allude to the idea of Ra's al Ghul as an ideal as opposed to a man, with someone else (Ken Watanabe) acting under the guise of Ra's al Ghul. This is done to emphasise the idea that pervades the film that a man can be destroyed, whereas an idea, or "legend" as Ra's al Ghul puts it, is indestructible. During this time, Ra's al Ghul trains him, and encourages his crusade for justice in light of his disillusionment with Gotham City and its corruption as a result of the mafia's control. During this training, the active score works to forge a positive association with Wayne's training under the League of Shadows, consequently creating a positive association with the League of Shadows, which is supported by Murray Smith, who claims that film scores can work together with the dramatic structure and the states of characters (p.152, 1995), something that is highly evident throughout the training

scenes of *Batman Begins*. However, at the end of his training, Wayne's final test is to kill a convicted murderer as a means to enforce justice, a scene with an unnerving, quiet score. This score works to invoke the conflict within Wayne of wanting to devote himself to justice, but not commit murder to do so, ultimately transforming into a different, heavier, fast-paced action score to evoke the same ideas and emotions as the earlier training scene, as well as associating those emotions with the destruction of the League of Shadows base of operations. This is how the film blurs the lines between heroism and villainy, in that it works to where the disparity between the hero and the villain is divulged, as Wayne refuses to kill as a means to justice, and, along with the way in which the film is primarily framed from his perspective, then places Wayne as the hero and Ra's al Ghul as the villain.

However, given that the two characters both seek justice, albeit through different means, it can be said that Ra's al Ghul perceives himself as a hero, much like Thanos, aiming to kill those who would induce corruption as a means of ending the suffering of those underneath them. Likewise, as will be discussed later in relation to Thanos himself, the film uses over-the-shoulder camera angles to represent the viewpoint of the character from whom the angle is presented. The film utilises these shots throughout *Batman Begins,* even in scenes after the reveal of Henry Ducard as Ra's al Ghul, doing so to reveal him as the villain. For example, in the scene where Ra's al Ghul reveals his true identity to Wayne during his birthday party, the camera begins by tracking both of them from the same angle as they walk, turning into an over-the-shoulder shot from Wayne's perspective, which then becomes the dominant perspective throughout the scene. The specific use of over-the-shoulder shots and the specific perspectives taken show how Ra's al Ghul's idea of justice is being presented as more negative. This is supported by Christine Muller's statement that, despite the evenness of power between the heroes and villains, which side, and therefore, which values, should be followed is endorsed by the story (p.271, 2017). This can be taken further through the cinematographic techniques. This shows that while the film displays the idea of the end of corruption as a positive, more specificity must be taken with regards to the methods themselves, and that is what must be regarded as good or evil. Another example drawn from how the film decreases the dichotomy of good and evil between Wayne and Ra's al Ghul is through the costume use. This is shown is through the use of costume similarities between the Batman armour and the outfits

worn by Ra's al Ghul and Wayne during the latter's training. Both involve the wearing of bladed gauntlets that allow them to trap the opponent's swords if one is disarmed at any point, further emphasising the blurring between the morality of the two characters.

Similarly, it is also important to discuss the messianic imagery found within superhero stories that allow them to be perceived as godly characters. For this, the example discussed will be Kal-El/Clark Kent/Superman (Christopher Reeve) from the 1978 film *Superman* (Directed by Richard Donner), one of the first big-budget superhero films ever made. While it is true that messianic figures have been present throughout cinema's history beyond superhero films, such figures outside of superhero cinema are not relevant to this thesis, and with a strong representation from one of the earliest superhero films, it is best to persist with the most relevant example. Likewise, John Lyden claims that to interpret every film as having Christian imagery is to stretch the interpretation of such ideas in ways that commit an injustice against both the films themselves and to Christianity itself (p.24, 2003). This idea of over-extending an interpretation to all films is ironically also a common criticism of the Hero's Journey, which is why it will be important to examine *Infinity War* in relation to how it both does and does not relate to the Monomyth. Following the comic book origin story, which connotes the idea that messianic characters are synonymous with superhero media, Superman is sent down to Earth from his heavenly planet of Krypton, which in the case of the film, is designed with a strong white colour palette that resembles traditional ideas of Heaven, which the Kryptonians likewise display in their costumes. Furthermore, when Krypton is destroyed, it takes on a bright red colour, as a connotation of the opposition of Hell. Superman's infant blankets, likewise, are a striking red, blue and gold that in later life will become the colours of his costume. Similarly, prior to him being sent to Earth, Superman's father, Jor-El (Marlon Brando) tells him that;

"All that I have, all that I've learned, everything I feel… all this, and more I… I bequeath you, my son. You will carry me inside you… all the days of your life. You will make my strength your own, and see my life through your own eyes, as your life will be seen through mine. The father will become the son, and the son will become the father" (Jor-El, 1978).

This monologue depicts the way in which superheroes are shown as messianic, as it reflects the idea of the Holy Trinity from Christianity, the idea of the Father (God), the Son (Jesus Christ), and the Holy Ghost as one in the same. Referring to the film in question, the father is Jor-El, Superman is the son, and the Holy Ghost can be understood as the projection of Jor-El that is found on Earth when Superman asserts his superhero/messianic identity in what will later be known as the Fortress of Solitude. These points regarding the plot of *Superman* in relation to the representation of messianic figures in superhero films display how long these ideas have pervaded in American superhero cinema.

As an understanding of ambiguous morality and messianic figures in superhero films has been divulged, it is important to return to Thanos in relation to The Hero's Journey. The Hero's Journey is split up into three sections, which are further divided into seventeen subsections, some of which, the film amalgamates into one act or moment. The first section is that of the Departure, wherein the hero leaves behind the world they have grown up within and go into the unknown. Despite the earlier self-imposed restrictions placed on the Monomyth analysis, the Departure features two sections that are amalgamated within *Infinity War,* that being the 'Crossing the Threshold' and the 'Belly of the Whale', the former being where the Hero crosses into his new realm, away from the world he has grown so comfortable with, while the latter represents this further, mainly acting to confirm the crossing. For Thanos, these two segments of the Hero's Journey are achieved differently, with the latter being achieved through a brief battle, while the former is achieved symbolically. Both phases can also hold a guardian of some type, though not always necessary, who aims to prevent the crossing and the Hero's access to what Campbell called 'magnified power' (p.64). The role of the guardian in *Infinity War* is played by the Hulk (Mark Ruffalo), who is shown attacking Thanos as Loki offers him the Tesseract/Space Stone, in an attempt to prevent Thanos's access to Campbell's proclaimed 'magnified power.' Likewise, as has been previously stated, Thanos sheds his armour as Ebony Maw presents him with the Tesseract/Space Stone, which is representative of a change in persona for Thanos, from that of a warrior to a crusader, and furthermore, represents his growing power. This is shown by Ebony Maw stating that "no other being has had the strength, nay the nobility, to wield not one, but two Infinity Stones." This is done while the camera focuses on Thanos shedding his armour, which further

shows the way in which Thanos's growing power and lack of armour represents his Crossing of the Threshold and the Belly of the Whale respectively.

The second section of the Hero's Journey, known as the Initiation, details the Hero once they have left their home world behind them, and have ventured into the world they do not know. The portion of the Initiation that will be discussed is the Meeting with the Goddess, which Thanos definitively undergoes. This is where the Hero meets with a female who is the 'promise of perfection' (p.92), which is evident in Gamora in that she is the only person who Thanos is aware of that knows the location of the Soul Stone, meaning that without him knowing that she is aware of this, he would not be able to acquire all the Infinity Stones and gain the power necessary to complete his goals and achieve omnipotence. This is further emphasised by Campbell stating that 'the woman is life, the hero its knower and master' (p.101), which is shown by Gamora's knowledge of the Soul Stone's location. Furthermore, Thanos and Gamora's first meeting is shown in the movie for the first time in the MCU, going back to when he halved the population of her planet, and took her with him to become a warrior for his cause, showing the actual Meeting with the Goddess itself. This meeting itself also demonstrates further the experimental nature of *Infinity War,* as the scene where Gamora and Thanos meet is one of the few scenes in the film where the perspective of one other than the 'Hero' is granted. This is done, as will be elaborated on later, through over-the-shoulder shots. These shots allow for the perspective of the character from whom the camera takes position behind, and while this is mostly done through *Infinity War* with Thanos, the first time he meets Gamora, the camera takes position from both characters to allow for Gamora's perspective as well. This shows how the film is experimental with the Hero's Journey in that it allows for the perspective of more than just the Hero, in this case enabling the perspective of the 'Goddess'.

The third and final section of the Hero's Journey, called the Return, details the Hero's return to the world he once knew, but with his since acquired growth and strength, the latter part being shown by his acquisition of the Infinity Stones. Following on from this, the next step of the Return is the Magic Flight. The Magic Flight is where the Hero wins the blessing of the god or goddess and returns swiftly to the world (p.170b). This

is found when Doctor Strange (Benedict Cumberbatch) gives Thanos the Time Stone, representing the 'god's blessing,' as Strange, as a superhero, is representative of a god, and Thanos subsequently uses the Space Stone to warp to Earth to retrieve the final Infinity Stone, the warp of course being representative of the return to the world. This shows how The Hero's Journey can be applicable to Thanos.

Following on from this, it is also important to discuss the way in which Thanos defies the traditional Hero's Journey. As a character that holds genocidal aims, Thanos cannot be perceived as a purely heroic character, and therefore he cannot adhere completely to the idea of the Hero's Journey. Likewise, this also relates to the idea of the experimental nature of *Infinity War*, in that it shows that, despite a character being placed on a Hero's Journey, due to their truly villainous aims, they cannot wholly be considered a 'Hero'. Thanos's 'Refusal of the Call' is the first part of the Hero's Journey that shows that Thanos does not always follow the traditional Hero's Journey, in that Refusal of the Call is known as the part of the Journey wherein the Hero initially rejects the adventure that they have been called to undertake. Thanos, on the other hand, is not shown as rejecting the Call to Adventure at any point, being shown as being confident in his aims to halve the universe's population. Likewise, given that the earlier stage of the 'Call to Adventure' is not shown, nor can the Refusal of the Call even exist in the plot, further showing how the Hero's Journey does not apply to Thanos.

The Ultimate Boon, likewise, is the section of the Initiation portion of the Hero's Journey that does not apply to Thanos. The Ultimate Boon is the item that the Hero will acquire that will help them to overcome whatever awaits them for the rest of the Journey. Furthermore, it will often be linked to the Call to Adventure in that it may be the reason that the Hero's Journey takes place in the first place. However, it is best argued that the Ultimate Boon does not take place in *Infinity War*, due to the fact that Thanos has multiple boons that he collects over the course of the film in the form of the Infinity stones, and as such, he does not have one specific 'Ultimate' Boon, but many that take place during all portions of the Hero's Journey. Here, in the ambiguous nature of whether or not this phase of the Hero's Journey is applicable to Thanos shows how not all phases are not always applicable to all stories, relating back to the

earlier claim that *Infinity War* can be seen as an experimental film that questions the use of the Hero's Journey, and whether or not it can be applied to villains in the same way as it can be applied to heroes. While it could be argued that the Soul Stone could be seen as the Ultimate Boon, in that its elevated status above the other Infinity Stones by its hidden nature prior to the film's release, as well as it being stated by the Red Skull to have a "certain wisdom," and a "special place among the Infinity Stones," implies that it is more important than the rest of the Stones, and is so the Ultimate Boon when placed in opposition to the other Stones. In contrast, the Ultimate Boon often requires the gods to be tricked for it, which Thanos does not do, and instead essentially makes a deal with them instead by exchanging Gamora's life for the Soul Stone, displaying the difficult nature of trying to consider Thanos as a hero, especially in the context of the Hero's Journey.

In the discussion of the subsection that Thanos defies within The Return, the example that will be discussed is the Refusal of the Return. This is where the Hero finds it difficult to return to the world he came from, whether that be his own choice, or through an inability to do so. This portion of the Hero's Journey is not applicable to Thanos, but not in that he refuses to return to his home planet, but that he cannot return to it as it was, as a result of its prior desolation. This ruination is symptomatic of Thanos's inability to return to his home, but is furthered by his temporary illusory restoration of his home planet that is enacted by his use of the Reality Stone to show Doctor Strange what it used to look like. In this, it is not possible for him to refuse the return, and so it cannot apply to Thanos, especially given that, even if he returns to Titan as it is now, it is not the world that he used to know.

Similarly, it is also possible to discuss Thanos acquiring Infinity Stones as archetypes, a discussion that will further take the same restriction from the Hero's Journey section for the same reasons. Young claims that an archetype, in its pure form is inaccessible, but is expressed through symbols (p.28), such as the Infinity Stones. Similarly, in the case of *Infinity War*, the cinematographic elements of the film also work to display the symbolic elements of the archetypes. To give an example, when Thanos claims the Space Stone, he is embodying and confronting the archetype of the hero. While the hero is the key archetype of the Hero's Journey, in this example, Thanos must

both confront and overcome the hero in order to become the hero archetype which has been previously discussed. This hero archetype is best embodied in Thanos's acquirement of the Space Stone through the traditional hero characters he fights prior to gaining it, namely Thor, Loki, and Hulk. As the three primary hero characters, or closer to traditional heroism than Thanos at least, Thanos must defeat all three to display his heroic persona. He begins with Thor, who is close to incapacitated when he first appears on-screen. As one of the classic Avengers, having been in the film series since 2011 and appearing in the first *Avengers* film, Thor is one of the archetypal heroes of the MCU, having been through his own Hero's Journey previously, and his near-death state at the beginning of *Infinity War* shows Thanos's overcoming of him. Next is Hulk, who is the only of the Avengers to have an on-screen battle with Thanos prior to the Space Stone being acquired. While Hulk initially gains the upper hand on Thanos by catching him off-guard, Thanos later defeats Hulk with ease, using only his strength and combat skills to defeat him. The film further displays Thanos's being able to overcome the hero archetype and become it through the fact that he is not shown as using the Power Stone to defeat Hulk. His use of only his physical prowess shows how Thanos himself is capable of overcoming the hero archetype, and in doing so, is worthy of it. Finally, when confronting Loki, a character who as was previously mentioned, is ambiguous in his morality, Thanos kills him, confirming him as the hero archetype. However, as Thanos shows, to fulfil the conditions of becoming the hero archetype does not necessarily mean that the hero is a prosocial figure, as his aims of killing half the universe shows. Despite this, he believes himself to be a hero, and through this belief, Thanos fulfils the objective requirements.

In turn, Thanos, when he acquires the Reality Stone, embodies the trickster archetype to do so. In this scene, Thanos, after claiming the stone in a location known only as Knowhere, laying waste to it in the process, uses the Stone to disguise Knowhere to give the impression to the Guardians of the Galaxy, who are tracking him down, that he has yet to do any of that. During which, Gamora kills a fake version of Thanos. Upon doing this, Thanos reveals his deception and uses it to capture Gamora. Bassil-Morozow claims that 'tricksters reverse the hierarchic order, are shapeshifters and are famous for their malicious tricks and pranks' (p.44, 2017). The actions that Thanos takes here are not just an example of him displaying the trickster archetype through his 'malicious trick,' but it is also important to note that the reversal of the hierarchic

order can also be seen as an indicator of the way in which the film reverses the typical Hero's Journey while still adhering to it at the same time. Thanos's malicious tricks also goes further when Star-Lord, in response to an earlier promise to Gamora to kill her if Thanos captures her, attempts to kill her, but in doing so, Thanos turns his laser beams into bubbles. Prior to this, the difficulty of the decision for Star-Lord is shown heavily through over-the-shoulder shots and reverse angles designed to build the tension towards the expected kill, as well as to help show this difficulty as he makes the decision to kill his romantic interest, only for it to be irrelevant when he shoots and it is revealed that Thanos was never going to allow him to kill Gamora, even despite encouraging him to do so. This subverts the audience's expectations, as such camera shots, when used in conjunction with fast editing, are often used together to build tension towards a climactic event in either the scene, or the whole film. This is another example of Thanos's trickster, as such and further emphasises the Reality Stone as the trickster archetype.

However, it is also important to note that *Endgame* displays the way in which it is only *Infinity War* where Thanos takes his Hero's Journey. This is done through the return to the MCU's traditional iconographic style that permeates the rest of the films wherein the Avengers are the focus of the cinematography, which will be expanded upon later, as well as his death at the start of the film. Furthermore, Thanos defines himself as having completed his Hero's Journey when he uncovers his own death within Nebula's (Karen Gillan) memories, stating that his death is "destiny fulfilled." This is further emphasised by Campbell stating that 'the happy ending is justly scorned as a misrepresentation; for the world, as we know it, as we have seen it, yields but one ending: death, dismemberment, and the crucifixion of our heart with the passing of the forms that we have loved' (p.19). This 'crucifixion of the heart' referenced by Campbell is the idea of abandoning that which the Hero loves for the sake of helping others, which Thanos has done with Gamora.

Furthermore, there are many moments throughout *Infinity War* in which the traditional iconography of the MCU is used to give the impression of Thanos being the hero, outside of the aforementioned Hero's Journey. Richard Barsam and David Monahan claim that 'editing often establishes patterns and rhythms, only to break

them for dramatic impact' (p.18, 2010). While they were no doubt talking about the use of editing within a single film, this is not to say that it cannot also apply to a series of films, along with using every other aspect of cinema in the same way as editing, such as cinematography. One way in which this is done is through the use of over-the-shoulder shots. Throughout the MCU, one common cinematic technique that is used as a method of representing certain characters as the morally correct is to position an over-the-shoulder shot at precise moments, such as when Tony Stark chastises Peter Parker for acting irresponsibly in *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (Directed by Jon Watts, 2017). Filmmakers will often opt to utilise over-the-shoulder shots as a means of representing the character's POV as accurately possible. Throughout *Infinity War*, there are very few over-the-shoulder shots taken from the Avengers and Guardians of the Galaxy, in comparison with the number of over-the-shoulder shots taken from the perspective of Thanos. One example of this is towards the end of the film, when Thanos has acquired all six Infinity Stones. After this happens, Thor attempts to kill him using his axe, Stormbreaker, which wounds Thanos in the chest. After he lands the blow, Thanos and Thor go face to face while Thor takes the time to quip in a way that acts as a verbal call back to the beginning of the film. While giving Thanos a chance to say his assumed last words, the camera alternates between shots of his face that display his pain, in an attempt to elicit sympathy, and over-the-shoulder shots that allow alignment with Thanos. This allows access to Thanos's perspective in a way that has been performed countless times before throughout the MCU as a means of granting an individual's perspective. Furthermore, after Thanos causes the Decimation, the camera pans from an over-the-shoulder shot from Thanos' perspective to a mid-shot of Thanos, and closer to the perspective of Thor. This panning of the camera attempts to move the perspective away from Thanos, and grant it to the Avengers, as was expected for the film. Another way in which Thanos is framed as the hero is through the credits. During many of the end credit sequences in the MCU, the credits will often end with a phrase stating that the hero of the film will return, such as 'Captain America will return' at the end of *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014). However, at the end of the credits for *Avengers: Infinity War*, the credits state 'Thanos will return', cementing his positioning as the hero of *Infinity War*.

It is also important to examine the ways in which Thanos can be seen as acting as a representation for a Christian god in many other ways, particularly relating to ways in which moments of his appearances within the MCU mirror moments within the Bible itself. The importance of these links between Thanos' story and moments in the Bible is the relevance of archetypes. While this thesis has previously discussed how Thanos embodies archetypes himself, it is also important to discuss how moments in his story act as invoking archetypal images. As has been previously stated, archetypes cannot have physical form in and of themselves, but can activated through archetypal imagery. While the topic of archetypes has been explored greatly in specific preceding sections of this thesis, the subject of archetypal images must also be explored in a similar manner. Archetypal images act as a way to activate the archetypes themselves, and, as Reynolds claims, archetypal images are found consistently throughout religious and filmic imagery, and are also evolutionary, reflecting the ways in which society itself changes at the same time (p.90). This shows the way in which religious archetypal imagery can be translated into filmic archetypal imagery, and in doing so, activates the same archetypes within the unconscious. One key example of this is Gamora's death scene. In *Avengers: Infinity War*, as has been previously mentioned, Gamora is seen throughout the film to be Thanos's favourite child, despite his love for all of his children. However, his murder of her is starkly similar to the death of Jesus in the Bible. Firstly, Gamora's death takes place atop a hill, and, while the location of Jesus' crucifixion is not exacted, many scholars, such as Carrie L. Lewis, believe that it took place on Skull Hill, or Calvary Hill as it is also known when translated into biblical Greek (pp.355 – 356, 2005). This shows how Gamora's death can be likened to Jesus's in that both held a geographical similarity. This theory is further emphasised by the appearance of the Red Skull as the guardian of the Soul Stone. As such, he becomes the MCU's namesake for the hill that links the deaths of Gamora and Jesus together. Secondly, in the eyes of Thanos, Gamora's death is seen as a necessity for the good of the universe. Likewise, Jesus' crucifixion was seen as a way of reconnecting God with humanity, and in turn, allowing the human race to gain access to heaven when they die, showing the way in which the death of the child was done for the benefit of humanity. The crucifixion was also seen as Jesus dying to forgive the sins of humanity, so that they may not just ensure going to heaven, but also avoid going to hell. As such, Thanos sees the sacrifice of his daughter as a way of avoiding the suffering of the hell that can be found in life, most notably that of hunger and poverty. Likewise, the

similarities between Gamora's death and the death of Jesus act as an example of archetypal images that permeate both religion and popular culture.

Another part of Thanos that likens him to a Christian god is that of his followers. Much like the God found in Christian theology, Thanos has legions of devout followers who embody those who follow God in real life. Firstly, starting with the Children of Thanos, also known as the Black Order, the Children of Thanos are Thanos's second-in-command members of his army, who were picked for various reasons that would indicate their strength and capabilities. While there were initially six, with Gamora and Nebula leaving as a result of their awareness of Thanos as an abusive father, the four remaining members are devout to his cause. This is best displayed in *Infinity War*, when Ebony Maw is not only determined to bring the Time Stone to Thanos, but also separate it from Doctor Strange for fear of "judgement". This shows how he wishes to be viewed positively by Thanos, regardless of the cost, and likewise, will do whatever he can to please him. Likewise, 'judgement' is a phrase often used in Christian theology to indicate the decision of God to decide whether or not one of his followers were worthy of salvation. Similarly, in *Infinity War*, the Children of Thanos also refer to Thanos as "father," which further indicates him as a god, in the sense that God is often referred to as the Father in the Bible. This idea is supported by Jung, who claims that the Church acts as a substitute for the natural connection with the parents (p.43, 1989), which is further embodied by the fact that, returning to Gamora's first meeting with Thanos, she had lost her mother, and can be seen as attaching herself to him as a reluctant replacement for her lost mother, 'lost' being used here both literally, and metaphorically for death. This idea is one which will be visited and expanded in the third section of this thesis, focusing on the family in relation to God in the *Guardians of the Galaxy* films. However, this verbal address changes in *Endgame*, as a means of removing his heroic framing from that in *Infinity War*, instead having the Children call him 'sire' instead of 'father'. Further from this, Ebony Maw, after the slaughter of the Asgardians aboard the refugee vessel at the start of *Infinity War*, tells them that "even in death, you have become Children of Thanos". This is highly similar to the way in which, according to Christianity, all are seen as Children of God. However, it is important to point out that this is more of a radical representation of Christianity, as opposed to liberal, and so cannot be applied to all forms of Christianity. The film, and in turn the representation of Thanos and his

Children, can be seen as a warning against religious radicalism as opposed to demonising religion as a whole.

Thanks to the combination of Campbell's Hero's Journey, traditional and modern religious ideas, and the manipulation of traditional MCU iconography, Thanos is depicted as a hero, a villain, and a god, through his altruistic reasoning, genocidal means, and divine attributes respectively. Although genocide is an evil act, Thanos' motivation to do it for the sake of long-term preservation of resources to create a higher standard of living is represented in a subversive manner as altruistic. As such, Thanos is represented in the same way that a traditional Marvel superhero would be, in spite of his villainous nature. However, there is one key attribute within the Marvel formula that separates Thanos from the true heroes, and that is his lack of a split psyche. Thanos, as he is, does not harbour an alternate persona through which he enacts acts that another side of his personality does not, and as such, emphasises his godhood, which in turn can be seen to separate him from the heroes and emphasise him as a villain. Furthermore, while it could be claimed that the two Thanos's of *Guardians of the Galaxy* and *Endgame*, and *Infinity War* could be perceived as two separate personas, the difference is that Thanos does not change between the two at will, which is the key difference between him and the heroes. The only moment where he is shown to change between the two is at the beginning of *Infinity War*, wherein there has yet to be an opportunity to learn about him as a character, and as such, they cannot identify the persona change until they do it retrospectively. To give a contrasting example of how Marvel heroes alternate their personas, Tony Stark, as will be elaborated upon in the next section, learns to activate his Iron Man persona with more immediacy throughout his character arc within the MCU, initially needing to go to the suit in *Iron Man*, but by *Endgame*, Stark is able to activate the suit at will, altering its form with additional weapons and tools through nano-technology. This shows how, unlike Stark, Thanos cannot alternate between his two personas at will, displaying his lack of one. Furthermore, the purpose of the persona within Marvel is to protect the individual against their psychological flaws and weaknesses, and as such, Thanos does not use a persona as he perceives himself to not have any flaws, as is shown by his statement of "I am inevitable," which displays his belief that he will not be stopped in his quest regardless of who or what opposes him. However, as he also claims, 'the arrogant suspect nothing,' and as such, he displays his own

arrogance, which is ultimately a psychological flaw in itself, and as such is his downfall. This is furthered by Erving Goffman who claims that, within mythology, both heroes and villains make fraudulent claims that are discredited in the last chapter, and that the villain does not have the high status they claim to have (p.67, 1990), which is shown by Thanos's ultimate failure to achieve his goal of genocide as seen in *Endgame*. Likewise, in relation to Thanos not using a persona to protect against flaws, he further displays his lack of a necessity for a persona through when he is made to bleed by Iron Man and responds by stating "all that for a drop of blood." Considering how far this is into the battle between Thanos and the Avengers and Guardians, this shows how near-invincible Thanos is, and further emphasises his lack of a need for his previously worn armour, and therefore his alternate persona.

Returning to Thanos's status as a hero, villain, god, and father, these differing but constant forms enable him to be represented as an achievable form of divinity through his morally ambiguous nature, as opposed to the unattainable nature of traditional monotheistic gods. However, as the earlier discussion surrounding Thanos as both a hero and a villain show, it might be more appropriate to call it the 'Protagonist's Journey', as opposed to Campbell's original name of the 'Hero's Journey'. This is because, while it may have positive, heroic connotations attached to it, the word 'protagonist' is by definition, devoid of morality, and is actually used to refer simply to the main character of a story, whereas the word 'hero', by contrast is used in relation to prosocial figures in society and storytelling, and therefore, despite his self-perceived heroic intentions, the term 'hero' is not fully applicable to Thanos. The term 'protagonist' is also more useful in broader cinematic contexts, with a number of films focusing on antisocial main characters, such as *Joker* (Directed by Todd Phillips, 2019). Much like with other superheroes, the film represents Thanos as a God, not just because of his divinity, but also because of the way in which his self-perceived altruistic aims are framed from his perspective. Similarly, his emotional connection with his daughter Gamora, in spite of his sacrifice of her also represent him as a God, as well as representing him as a father who loses his child through his own will, much like God's sacrifice of Jesus, his own son. Likewise, Helena L. Martin claims that suffering, through a Christian lens, also implies a sense of authority in the character through both their perspectives, as well as from the perspectives of others (p.454, 2020). This helps the film to frame Thanos away from a villainous

representation by creating a sense of respect for him that is further caused by the previously mentioned over-the-shoulder shots that are used from Gamora's perspective earlier in the film, which likewise frames a sense of respect as a father figure. In contrast, the act of becoming a farmer after enacting the Decimation provides a more human representation to him, as he is shown to do so without the use of the Infinity Stones, which he could use to create the food he farms, but instead works hard for it. This helps explain how he can be seen as human as much as any of the other protagonists of the Marvel Universe, in spite of his newfound omnipotence.

How the Marvel Cinematic Universe superheroes act as both gods and humans, using Tony Stark/Iron Man as a case study

Superheroes in the MCU, as in the Marvel Comics Universe, tend to not only act godly, but display a more human side as well. It is as a result of this human side that the Marvel heroes become vulnerable in spite of their God-like nature, with Morrison stating that 'every Marvel hero had to have a psychological Achilles' heel' (p.111). Furthermore, the heroes of the Marvel Universe often have their personalities divided into the human side and the superhero side, and these 'psychological Achilles' heels' as Morrison puts it, only tend to apply to the human side. It is only with the acknowledgement of their human sides does the concept of vulnerability come into play, one example of this being Tony Stark/Iron Man, played by Robert Downey Jr. One of the most prominent heroes of the MCU, as well as the first in terms of release date, Tony Stark/Iron Man currently holds the highest number of MCU appearances for any character, appearing in a total of eleven MCU films, including his uncredited cameo in *The Incredible Hulk* (Directed by Louis Leterrier, 2008). This level of presence within a cinematic universe makes a section devoted to this character essential within this thesis. Throughout the MCU, Tony Stark and Iron Man are differentiated through a number of cinematic techniques, including the targeted shots on Stark's face as opposed to Iron Man's, and the constant references to Iron Man as a separate entity to Stark, particularly when Stark proclaims "I am Iron Man" in such a way to create a conscious amalgamation of the two identities. The phrase "I am Iron Man" is used throughout the MCU as an acknowledgement of this amalgamation. However, considering how long Stark's arc is throughout the MCU, it is difficult to ascertain whether or not this amalgamation is maintained consistently, or if it has differing meanings throughout the franchise. According to Ashley Suffle Robinson, the two are even referenced separately in the script of *Avengers Assemble* (p.830a, 2018). An example of this is in the fight between Thor and Iron Man, where Stark is called 'Tony' when his faceplate is up, and 'Iron Man' when it is down. Kaveney supports this concept of two separate identities within superheroes by claiming that a secret identity, though not secret in the film, demonstrates a divided personality (p.9a). However, it is important to note here that the superhero personality is not divided perfectly into two separate sides of the personality, but is more of a spectrum upon which each superhero falls, with some falling closer to their civilian persona, while

others fall closer to their superhero, or God, persona. Here, the need to analyse Stark/Iron Man in this sense becomes evident, as his divide can be seen more cinematically than other superheroes.

An important concept within psychology that will be discussed within this section is that of the Jungian persona. The persona is the idea of a psychological mask that is used by an individual as a means of preventing the underlying true self from being seen by others, with Jung claiming that the persona is the image that people put out to the public world that may not reflect their true selves (p.123, 1990). The Jungian persona is heavily relevant to the superhero myth in that the question is raised as to which side of the individual is the true self, and which is the persona that someone wants to put out to the world. When specifically addressed in reference to Tony Stark/Iron Man in the MCU, it becomes evident that the former is the true self, but the latter is designed, not only to protect the former, but also to disguise it for the same purpose. Robinson supports this by stating that the persona 'starts out as Stark's ticket to freedom in Afghanistan but becomes Stark's method of confronting his flaws and reclaiming his potential' (p.830b). At the end of *Iron Man* (Directed by Jon Favreau, 2008), Stark furthers this by stating in a press conference "I am Iron Man", a statement which indicates an acknowledgement of his public persona to the world, and further allows him to avoid showing his Stark side publicly, particularly after he starts talking about how he is not Iron Man by listing character flaws that he claims indicate this, most notably his narcissism, displaying how, as R.D. Laing claimed, the persona is false, whereas the self, that of Stark, is the truest version of the individual (p.75, 2010). The slow zoom into close-up shot of Stark when he proclaims his persona further exemplifies the split, as stating so displays his aforementioned narcissism, as he has full awareness of the fact that he will gain attention as a result of it. However, at the end of *Iron Man 3* (Directed by Shane Black, 2013), he states the same, after being without the suit for most of the film. While the first connotes acknowledgement of his public persona, and further emphasises his narcissism, the second announcement of it, as part of narration which is designed to give the Stark a direct mode of address that displays his vulnerable manner, and implies an amalgamation of both Stark and Iron Man into one being; a restoration of the persona to the unconscious, which Jung states is an important aspect of the persona (p.453). Likewise, Bordwell emphasises the importance that if a character has a flaw, they

must overcome it (p.30), the flaw being referenced here being Stark's narcissism. Taking these claims in conjunction with each other, they display the way in which Stark begins as a narcissist, progressing to his self-confessed "genius, billionaire, playboy, philanthropist", continuing on to become a paternal figure, and finishing as a self-sacrificial, Christ figure, displaying evidence of Jung and Bordwell's claims.

With an explanation of the Jungian persona given, there must now be a discussion of the concept of vulnerability in relation to MCU superheroes. MCU superheroes, as has been said, are defined in terms of their vulnerability, and there is no one that this is truer of than Tony Stark/Iron Man. This section will focus on the prospect of vulnerability in relation to humanity, specifically Stark, and how his relationship to it has evolved and changed, and likewise, how his relationship to the Iron Man persona, which is defined as 'invincible' in the comics, reflects this. The concept of invincibility is one highly associated with godhood, and so the title 'The Invincible Iron Man,' as he is called in the comic books, is appropriate for the superhero; Stark on the other hand, is marked by his constant fight with vulnerability, and so utilises the concept of the persona as a defense mechanism to help protect his vulnerable body. Defence mechanisms, as well as repression according to Anna Freud, function to help repress that which the individual is not comfortable with, and which could be damaging to the psyche, but invariably ends up forming other issues regardless (p.537, 2005). Similarly, unlike most other superheroes, Stark has no supernatural or superhuman abilities himself, but uses his intellect to actively enable his own repression via the Iron Man persona to protect him from acknowledging his own vulnerability, and likewise his fear of death. Similarly, this has led to a split in Stark's personality, resulting in the god side of Iron Man, while the human Stark is still present. While Stark is a physically vulnerable human, Iron Man is godly in the sense of being defined as 'invincible,' a quality found outside of human capabilities, as well as his abilities to fly and his energy-based weaponry.

Stark's God/human spectrum is first shown in the first few scenes of *Iron Man*. In the beginning, Stark is shown with a number of American army troops on their way from a weapon demonstration. While with these troops, he suffers a near-fatal attempt on his life that leaves him with shrapnel embedded in his heart from a weapon that was

double-dealt by his own company, framed with a bird's-eye view shot. The intention of the shot is to give a sense that Stark is laid bare, without protection, and scared for his life in a way that displays his humanity. This heavily contrasts with the gambling, drinking, womanising Stark that is shown thirty-six hours prior. This difference between his vulnerable near-death state and his hedonistic state displays the way in which the near-death experience leaves him with a conflict between his ego and his id. As he is conflicted between the ignorance that his pleasure-seeking id instilled in him and the effects that his ignorance has led to, specifically the deaths and dishonesty of his company double-dealing, which is opposed by his super-ego, he internally devises the Iron Man persona to amalgamate the two. This is supported by Freud, who claimed that conflict between these two parts of the psyche is what leads to neurotic disorders, as the material becomes repressed, but then finds a way to embody itself through methods that the ego does not identify or protect against (pp.563 – 564, 2005a). For Stark, this unidentified method is the Iron Man persona.

Similarly, it is no coincidence that he creates the Iron Man persona so soon after a near-death experience, as this leaves him with an unconscious need to regain his earlier sense of invincibility, which is evidenced by him giving a Jesus Christ pose to the soldiers at the weapons demonstration, giving the impression of Stark's own self-image. When the near-death experience occurs, Stark has this God-like sense of invincibility removed, and requires a replacement to gain a sense of psychological equilibrium, which he does through the creation of the Iron Man persona, which, according to Jung, leaves him believing that he has recreated his sense of invincibility because 'the persona is that which in reality one is not, but which oneself as well as others think one is' (p.123). This displays the way in which the Iron Man persona is deemed to be invincible, superhuman and godly, as Stark, the human, is not truly invincible, or at least, not as much as Iron Man. This personality divide is an important factor into the Tony Stark/Iron Man dynamic, as it displays the way in which a person can appear as one way to the world, but be another in a more private setting, a concept that is further backed by Jung, who claims that the persona forces individuals to be a particular way when they are presented to the world (pp.122 – 123).

Jung also states that the danger of the personality split is when the private individual identifies too strongly with the public persona. This is evident during *Iron Man 2* (Directed by Jon Favreau, 2010) in the scene where Stark is celebrating his birthday. In *Iron Man 2*, Stark discovers that he is suffering from blood poisoning as a result of the palladium that powers his arc reactor that was implanted in his chest after his near-death experience in *Iron Man*. While Stark has been faced with death before, this time is different as it is coming, not just from his own body, but from the very item designed to protect him from his earlier near-death experience. As a result of this, and some encouragement from Natasha Romanoff, he is shown wearing the Iron Man suit at his birthday party, with the face plate opened, as a way of connoting that he is as close to Iron Man as he can be while still appearing to others as Stark. This further displays the way in which Stark uses the Iron Man persona as a defence mechanism, believing that it will protect him from death, even when the source of his potential death is his own body. Furthermore, because of his drunken use of the Iron Man suit, he ends up having to fight Col. James 'Rhodey' Rhodes (Don Cheadle), who appropriates one of Stark's other Iron Man suits and becomes War Machine. The battle between the two of them acts as a battle between the self, in the form of Iron Man, and the Shadow, in the form of War Machine. This can be supported by Jung's claim that the presence of the Shadow reminds man of his weakness and ineffective nature, which Stark fears, leading to the fight. However, Jung further states that it is only through collaboration with the Shadow can the individual overcome the problems that he cannot defeat on his own (pp.20 – 21). This is later evidenced by the fact that War Machine fights alongside Iron Man in the final battle of the film, with them both utilising laser beams that connect with each other to cause an explosion, an act that, at the house party, was used in an aggressive manner as opposed to collaborative, which further displays how the Iron Man suit acts to promote Stark's altruism by converting an act that was once used to defend himself selfishly as a means of stopping the film's villain.

Similarly, returning to the discussion of the issue of strong identification with the persona, Stark is shown to be dependent on the Iron Man persona, not just psychologically, but biologically as well. Throughout *Iron Man 2*, Stark is shown to be poisoned by the palladium core that was created to power his Iron Man suit in the first film. However, the core is also used to power the electro-magnet that is

preventing shrapnel from entering his heart, showing how he also needs it to stay alive, creating a dependent attitude on the palladium. For the majority of the film, Stark acknowledges his assumed coming death, and acts recklessly as a result, engaging in a Grand Prix race, and, as previously mentioned, getting heavily drunk at his birthday party. This behaviour mirrors that of an alcoholic, displaying the consequently reduced inhibitions found concurrently within the actions of addicts. It is only when forced to work on creating a publicly undiscovered element that was originally conceived by his father does Stark learn to overcome his dependency. He does this through a remodel of his house that enables him to build a prismatic accelerator that will contribute to the creation of the replacement element, the remodel of his house acting as a physical embodiment of his changing psyche which allows him to escape dependency and turn to healthier alternatives. As will be discussed later, the home in cinema is often used as a psychological representation of the individual who lives there, in this case, Stark. This is further emphasised by the enacted destruction of his home when he drunkenly fights Rhodes during his birthday party, further showing his self-destructive tendencies as a result of his palladium poisoning. It must also be discussed how the final battle takes place at the Stark Expo, which was reinstated by Stark, and previously used by his father to display Stark technology to the world. Here, the environment acts to reinforce the strength of the Iron Man technology, as it is used by both Stark and Rhodes, in order to defeat the technology of Ivan Vanko (Mickey Rourke) and Justin Hammer (Sam Rockwell), the former being the son of a scientist who worked with Howard Stark, and the latter being a competitor of Tony Stark's. The defeat of both of these people as a result of this final battle emphasises the strength of the Stark legacy, and the superiority of Stark technology, taken in part by a scene early in a film, wherein Stark arrives at the Stark Expo by flying in and landing on the stage, and as Barsam and Monahan state, the positioning of an individual on a stage implies strength and nobility to the audience, which is integrated by the shared experience of the audience (p.8). This, however, shows the strength of the amalgamation of both sides of Stark's identity. While the Iron Man technology is superior in the examples given, it would not exist without both Tony and Howard Stark's intellects, acting as the first step towards an identification with his father.

While Stark's palladium dependency displays a psychotic representation of addiction, his obsession with suit creation in *Iron Man 3* displays the more neurotic psychological aspects. With Stark initially going through Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in *Iron Man 3* as a result of his near-death experience in *Avengers Assemble*, he begins obsessing over his Iron Man persona by developing the compulsion to build more Iron Man suits than he initially had, building an additional thirty-five between the two films. This is a massive increase in suit production, especially when it is noted that he only built seven between his initial imprisonment at the start of *Iron Man*, and *Avengers Assemble*. His act of constantly building suits likewise acts as a further reflection of his addictive personality. While his addiction in the comics has been focused upon most famously in one storyline, *Demon in a Bottle* (Michelinie, D. Layton, B. Romita Jr., J. Infantino, C., 2010), the closest the films ever came to directly addressing this was in his party scene in *Iron Man 2.* But while this showed alcohol addiction, *Iron Man 3* shows his addictive nature through his suit creation, which he did to constantly seek the sense of invincibility that he gained from the initial creation of the Iron Man suit. Furthermore, a post-credits scene reveals that the non-diegetic narration of *Iron Man 3* was actually Stark talking to Bruce Banner, who he expected to act as a therapist to him the entire time he was narrating the film, which helps further the sense of vulnerability and intimacy, as psychiatric patients undergoing therapy have to trust, and be open and honest with their therapist in order to cure their issues, which is supported by Allan R. Dyer and Sidney Bloch, who claim that it is most important for a therapist-patient relationship that is built on trust over 'respect for autonomy or paternalism' (p.27, 2006). This trust, created by the idea of Banner as the therapist, helps create a greater sense of intimacy with the character of Tony Stark.

Following on from this, the separation of the two personas is also maintained through the act of performing extreme close-ups on Stark while using wider, external shots of Iron Man. This is reinforced by James Monaco, who claims that the purpose of longer shots is to emphasize 'context over drama and dialectic over personality' (p.162, 1981). In an oppositional sense, this also shows how the close-ups on Stark's face emphasise his true personality, while the external shots are used to emphasise the action of the scene, as well as the purpose of the Iron Man persona to act as a superhero. The act of using these two separate shots while the persona is in use helps

define when each part of the personality is in play. Similarly, this split is furthered by how the two personas speak. While Iron Man keeps his words to business, Stark tends to use humorous quips frequented within Marvel. Stark's use of humour is a key example of his sense of vulnerability, as a contrast with the invincibility of Iron Man. According to Freud, humour is an attempt to gain superiority over the object of the humour, an action that Stark performs repeatedly as an attempt to compensate for his fear of death and vulnerability, both to friends and foes alike (as quoted in Young, S. D. p.116). For example, during the Battle of New York in *Avengers Assemble,* Stark states to Romanoff and Clint Barton/Hawkeye (Jeremy Renner) during a close-up in the Iron Man suit "What, did you stop for drive-thru"? as a way of chastising them for taking time to get there. As such, this displays the difference between the two personas, as Stark fears for his life and attempts to hide this fear behind an additional layer, that of humour.

Despite the Stark and Iron Man personas being defined as two separate personas, as the MCU continues, both personas amalgamate into one character, to the point where, by the end of his character arc, he can be claimed to be individuated. While this can be first seen at the end of *Iron Man,* when Stark states "I am Iron Man", there are more allusions to it further through the franchise. This amalgamation of the two personas is Stark's attempt at what Jung called 'individuation,' which is where a person becomes a psychologically united individual, as opposed to the split personas that the individual may have (p.275). This attempt at individuation first begins in *Iron Man 3*, where Stark attempts to become closer to his Iron Man suits by implanting nodes into his skin to allow him to summon the suits without having to worry about wearing additional clothing. As will be later discussed in more detail, this is as a result of his PTSD, which leaves him with a heightened sense of vulnerability, which he compensates for by creating a more symbiotic relationship with his suits. Similarly, the ability to summon the suits without needing additional accessories increases his sense of invincibility by decreasing the amount of time necessary to get prepared to wear it. This means that, in implanting the nodes that allow him to have the Iron Man suits more readily available, Stark can increase his sense of invulnerability by having a closer connection to the suits which have succeeded in protecting his life so many times before, despite the futility of the act in this instance. While the concept of Stark having a symbiotic relationship with the suits begins in *Iron Man 3*, it comes to

prominence more heavily in *Avengers: Infinity War*. At the start of *Infinity War*, Stark reveals that he has implanted a housing unit for nano-parts within his chest, in the same location as the arc reactor, the nano-parts being a replacement for Stark's full suit which needs to be summoned from a separate location otherwise. This is designed as a way for the Iron Man persona to be more a part of Stark in a way that deigns Stark in charge more in the sense that there's less risk of the suit not coming to him in time. Likewise, it also allows him to have the alternate persona more readily available.

Ironically, the placement of the housing unit in the same location as his earlier arc reactor is representative of him feeling more vulnerable as a result of the end of the Avengers that occurred in *Captain America: Civil War* (Directed by Anthony Russo and Joe Russo, 2016). Furthermore, Parker's rejection to be a part of the Avengers in *Spider-Man: Homecoming*, and the news that Vision (Paul Bettany) has gone AWOL prior to the events of *Infinity War* also leads to a lack of new Avengers. This leads to his desire for invincibility being reinforced as a result of his awareness at the fact that he has never been able to win a major battle within the MCU alone, and as a result, he resorts to attempting to replicate the conditions of him gaining the arc reactor so that he can once again restore his godly attribute of invincibility that was later enabled by being a part of the Avengers. The vulnerability displayed in the persona split is most evident in the battle on Titan, where Stark begins to run out of nano-parts fighting Thanos alone. As he runs out of parts, Stark becomes more visible in the battle, with the Iron Man parts barely covering him by the end of the fight. Similarly, when Iron Man starts fighting Thanos alone, the first attack Thanos enacts on him is to rip his helmet off, revealing a startled Stark, whose response to this is to create another helmet. While it is easy to claim that this was done as a means of protecting his head, it is also likely that this was done as a means of not showing his fear of vulnerability, which can be seen through Stark's frightened face inside the helmet when he is on the ground being attacked by Thanos. Furthermore, Stark's defensive choice when in this position is to protect his face, despite Thanos not aiming for the face, instead attacking the torso. This further reflects his fear of vulnerability, as he knows that if Thanos hits him in the face again, his helmet will be lost, and his vulnerability will once again be visible, as is shown by his multiple scared close-ups throughout the battle between the two of them. This is reinforced by Barsam and Monahan who state that

one of the purposes of costume is to suggest an image that the character is trying to project to the rest of the world (p.171), albeit in this case the image is attempting to be projected to one person, Thanos. This is carried on further by Stark using laser beams from his hands that involve him having to draw on other parts of the Iron Man suit to create the lasers in the first place, but again, refusing to remove any from the head, not including that which had already been destroyed by Thanos. This culminates in Thanos taking one of Stark's Iron Man blades, and then stabbing Stark through the stomach, at a point where Stark has almost no nano-parts left. Without the Iron Man suit and persona to protect him, Stark's fear of vulnerability is realized, and he is nearly killed, if not for Doctor Strange sacrificing one of the Infinity Stones (the Time Stone) in exchange for Stark's life. This reflects Stark's worst fear about the way in which the very armour he designed to protect him from death, has been used to enact exactly that, and how his sense of invincibility is ultimately egotistical in a way that nearly kills him. Likewise, the ensuing scene where Thanos comforts Stark, telling him that he 'has his respect', is then shot as a replica of a scene in *Iron Man,* where Obadiah Stane (Jeff Bridges) attempts to kill Stark by removing his arc reactor. This mirroring is further displayed by the use of Stark's own blades against him, which is similar to the way in which Stark was initially nearly killed in *Iron Man* by one of his own companies weapons. This is intended as a reminder to Stark, that, despite his advancements and character developments, Stark is still a vulnerable human, who is as susceptible to death as everyone else, and not the god that his suit would have him and everyone else believe.

Stark's fear of vulnerability is also reflected in the relationships he has with other people. He sees his vulnerability as something to be hidden, which is why his Iron Man technology is designed and built in the basement of his Malibu home, a location that is only ever visited by his close allies, most notably his romantic interest Virginia 'Pepper' Potts and his sidekick/friend James 'Rhodey' Rhodes/War Machine. According to Freud, the purpose of life is to gain pleasure; to this end, people put that which they do not enjoy or that which is damaging to the psyche into the unconscious mind as a way of avoiding that which causes, what Freud called 'unpleasure' (p.510, 2005b). This is often displayed in films by putting that which a character wishes to hide in the basement of their homes, such as Norman Bates' (Anthony Perkins) mother's body in *Psycho* (Directed by Alfred Hitchcock, 1960), or, in a more collective

sense, making significant events occur underground, so as to represent the unseen nature of the unconscious. The unconscious acts as the epicentre of instinctual mental processes, and as such, Stark wishes to keep those who he does not trust away from his basement, for fear of his need for the Iron Man suit for protection to be laid bare, and furthermore, his fear of vulnerability. This is further shown by the fact that the only two other characters to enter Stark's basement are Pepper Potts and Rhodey, whose relationships to Stark have been previously mentioned. He trusts these two most, and as such, feels comfortable sharing his vulnerability with them, reluctant though he may be. Stark's relationship with Potts is most notable for the fact that he was previously depicted as a womaniser prior to his relationship with her, especially with him being shown as having a one-night stand with reporter, Christine Everhart (Leslie Bibb), and as such, avoided being vulnerable with women. However, he is displayed as being comfortable enough with Potts that he can reveal his vulnerable side to her. The key example of this in *Iron Man* is the scene where she aids in replacing part of his arc reactor. Similarly using this example, Ben Saunders claims that the scene is set up similarly to that of a romantic film, with the low mood lighting and close-up of the pair together resembling the hallmarks of a 'more traditional Hollywood love scene' (p.104, 2011). This is mostly done through the lighting, which highlights Stark and Potts at the centred foreground of the shot, while the background is in darkness, and while Saunders later claim that the scene is used as an allegory for anal fisting is questionable, as it may be more that the scene is meant to be taken in a more metaphorical sense of Stark allowing Potts into himself mentally, there is no denying the sense of intimacy that the scene creates that implies the sense of vulnerability from both sides, and further shows Stark's selectivity around who he displays his vulnerability to.

The initial cause of Stark's fear of vulnerability comes from his relationship with his father. While not much is shown in relation to his relationship with his mother, Stark's relationship with his father is shown to be uneasy. This is first discussed when, in *Iron Man 2,* Stark defines his father as "cold", "calculating" and claims that he never even liked him. While the true nature of Howard's feelings towards his son is revealed later in the film, it is not until *Endgame* that Stark gains a true sense of closure with his father when he and Steve Rogers/Captain America (Chris Evans) time travel back to 1970 to retrieve the Tesseract from a S.H.I.E.L.D. base. Upon finding the Tesseract,

Tony is discovered by his father, and travels with him out of the base. It is here that Howard reveals he did not want a son because he feared that he would turn out like him in that he always believed that his own self-interest rarely outweighed the greater good, an admission that allows Tony to identify with him through his own aforementioned self-confessed narcissism, and acknowledgement of his companies past, granting him a sense of closure. Furthermore, when Howard questions Tony on how he felt about being a parent before his child was born, as a result of his own fear about parenthood, Tony is granted the ability to take on the role of the father to his own father by helping him with a problem, the same as a father should do with his child, which further aids in the identification. Tony's identification with his father is important in the sense that, in seeing his father be scared and vulnerable, it allows him to gain an acceptance with his own vulnerability, in that Freud claims that identification with the father is an important aspect for the creation of the super-ego in growth (p.398, 2005c). As a result of this, Tony's lost fear of vulnerability allows him to confront death willingly, which is important when it comes to his self-sacrifice as a means of defeating Thanos.

However, Stark's biological father is not his only paternal relationship within the MCU; Stark is displayed as having a series of paternal relationships throughout the MCU, starting with Obadiah Stane in *Iron Man*, continuing with Nick Fury (Samuel L. Jackson) in *Iron Man 2*, and Captain America in the *Avengers* films and *Captain America: Civil War*. The purpose of this is that, as Freud claims, as a person grows up, they come to use other figures of authority as a replacement for the father (p.460, 2005d). Stark's paternal issues are important because they mirror the real-world distrust of authority figures, which can be said to extend to those of a religious nature, such as members of the clergy, and by extension, God himself, who can be seen as a paternal figure. Starting in *Iron Man*, Stark's first paternal relationship is with Obadiah Stane, the current CEO of Stark Enterprises. As such, he not only takes over the role of Stark's father in an emotional sense, but also in a practical sense, with the company being stated as having gone straight to Stane, as opposed to Stark. The film even goes so far as to state that Stane 'helps to fill the gap left by the legendary founder'. This could also be seen as a reflection of Stark's emotionally infantile state, through the idea that he may not be mature enough to run a company yet, and further shows how Stane acts as a replacement for Stark's father. While Stark's biological father may have

unintentionally attacked him on a psychological level, Stane completes Stark's distrust of paternal figures by attacking him physically, which leaves him with an instinctive need to distrust paternal figures. Following on from Stane, the second of Stark's father figures, Nick Fury, displays this further, not so much in *Iron Man 2* when Stark refuses to believe Fury's claim that his father loved him, but more so in *Avengers Assemble*. This is shown when Stark, along with Bruce Banner and Captain America, discover that S.H.I.E.L.D. is planning to utilise the Tesseract to create weapons of mass destruction to be used against alien invaders. This further enforces Stark's distrust of paternal figures as a result of Fury's refusal to be honest about why they were using the Tesseract in the first place. As a result, he then refuses to be more open and vulnerable emotionally with paternal figures as a result of Fury's insistence of keeping secrets.

In later films, however, Stark actually becomes the paternal figure for others, starting in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (Directed by Joss Whedon, 2015). Campbell enforces this by claiming that the son and the father are one in the same, in spite of the destruction of the latter where applicable (p.303). While the idea of Stark becoming a father figure to others in the MCU can be seen as a strong sign of character development, initially, Stark is represented as a bad parental figure, with him creating Ultron (James Spader) in *Age of Ultron*, who is represented as Stark's child. Stark's creation of Ultron is further evidence of his fear of vulnerability, as he claims that he sees a "suit of armour around the world" when he is discussing the idea of creating Ultron. This displays the way in which he now feels the need, not only to protect himself from being vulnerable, but the entire world, which evidences the fact that, despite his resolution at the end of *Iron Man 3* of no longer needing a suit to protect himself, he still senses an oncoming threat (Thanos), and so designs Ultron as a means to defend the world against it. This creates the idea of Ultron as a tool for Stark, and this in turn leads to him being a bad parental figure, in that he sees his creation, not as an independent being of his own free will, but a tool for defence. This in turn, leads to Ultron seeing himself as a puppet to be used, which is where the references to *Pinocchio* (Directed by Norman Ferguson, T. Hee, Wilfred Jackson, Jack Kinney, Hamilton Luske, Bill Roberts, and Ben Sharpsteen, 1940) becomes relevant. Throughout *Age of Ultron,* Ultron creates the idea of himself as a "puppet", claiming that he was previously held by strings, especially with the repeated use of the song 'I've Got No Strings', both

when Ultron is creating more bodies for himself in Sokovia, and when he is escaping the doomed Sokovia. He sees himself as this as he sees all of Stark's creations as puppets, as shown by his discussion with Ulysses Klaue (Andy Serkis), where he attacks Klaue for believing that he is under the control of Stark after he repeats one of his quotes. This attack shows his hatred for his father figure, seeing himself as being controlled by him, and lacking his own autonomy, which results in him wanting to be as different from Stark as much as possible. This is seen as a refusal to identify with the father, and as such, an inability become an idealized self, despite his attempts to do so by creating stronger bodies, something which is mirrored in Stark with his obsessive suit creation in *Iron Man 3*, ironically causing him to become his father, or at least a previous version of him.

Likewise, his position as a father figure to Peter Parker/Spider-Man and his daughter Morgan display the way in which he becomes Godly through his role of the father, though this idea of Godhood and fatherhood will be expanded upon greatly in the next section of this thesis. This is also not to say that Stark has become God himself, but rather that he has taken on one of the roles that is heavily associated with God, particularly when a human father figure is not physically present in an individual's life. This is especially noted through the fact that many of Stark's interactions with those whom he has a paternal relationship with are done without the Iron Man persona present. In being a parental figure, Stark also accepts his own flaws. This is most notably shown in *Spider-Man: Homecoming*, when he confronts Parker about his failed actions on the ferry. In this scene, Stark chastises him for not trusting him and acting to try and stop Adrian Toomes/The Vulture (Michael Keaton) on his own, prompting Parker to claim that he was 'just trying to be like him', to which Stark replies that he 'wanted him to be better'. This statement displays Stark's acknowledgement of his own flaws, and emphasises his desire for Parker to be a better hero than he was by not replicating his mistakes. This particular scene also demonstrates Lisa Purse's claim that the older hero takes on physical feats that the teenage hero would normally be expected to do, relegating the teenager to the position of spectator (p.108, 2011).

Despite his struggles with fatherhood and Ultron, Stark has been shown to have a more positive paternal relationship with Peter Parker. Despite him initially using

Spider-Man as a means to help him defeat Captain America and bring the Winter Soldier to justice, Parker develops a positive relationship with Stark as a result of his want of a father figure. One way this is done is through Stark's faith in Parker. In *Captain America: Civil War,* when Stark questions Parker on his superhero persona, Parker admits to the name of Spider-Man, to which Stark replies "not in that onesie you're not." This quote shows how Stark perceives Parker's potential as a superhero, but acknowledges that he requires better equipment, which he is willing to provide. Stark also acts as a father figure to Parker through the way in which he punishes him for trying to defeat The Vulture when he considers him unfit to do so. One example of this is after Spider-Man first encounters the Vulture, which results in him being dropped into the river, wherein he is rescued by a remote-controlled Iron Man suit. After saving him, Stark chastises him for trying to defeat the Vulture by himself, all the while looking after him by activating the Spider-Man suit's in-built heater to prevent hypothermia, as well as revealing that he has a tracker implanted into the suit. The fact that Stark both chastises him and looks after him afterwards shows how he is trying to protect him as a father figure, so as to prevent him from being seriously hurt. Similarly, after Parker's failed attempt at stopping the Vulture on the ferry, when Stark later tells Parker that, if he were to die, he would feel like it was his fault. This is further emphasised by the setting of the scene at sunset, so as to connote the idea of it being the end of Parker's superhero career. This shows how Stark acts as a father figure to Parker in the sense that he does his best to protect him, as well as using it as a means to avoid his own suffering as a result of becoming vulnerable towards Parker. However, when Parker defeats the Vulture, Stark emphasises the idea of Parker as his surrogate son through a new and improved Iron Spider suit, modelled after a combination of Spider-Man's current suit, and the Iron Man armour. This shows Stark's belief that Parker possesses the potential to fulfil Stark's role, as well as a willingness to accept him into the Avengers family. However, Parker's rejection of this suit shows his own self-awareness at his own lack of readiness at becoming a fully-fledged superhero, leaving Stark surprised at the maturity of his decision. However, with one potential Avenger down after the split of the team in *Captain America: Civil War*, Stark recreates the arc reactor as a housing unit for nano-parts as compensation for his fear at a lack of Earth's defence, which, as mentioned earlier, is representative of his fear of vulnerability.

Another key way that Stark's vulnerability is displayed is through his struggles with mental illness. There has been little in the way of Christianity to imply that God has been known to suffer with mental health problems, which implies that they are a human issue, again, displaying the split between Iron Man and Tony Stark. While Stark can be seen as having psychological issues throughout the MCU, many of which are self-confessed, as is the case with his narcissism, the most notable problem that he suffers with in *Iron Man 3* is post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM – V) defines PTSD as a disorder that is known to come about as a result of a traumatic experience, such as war or sexual abuse, and presents itself as a variety of symptoms. These symptoms include:

Recurring, intrusive memories regarding the event, recurring dreams that relate to the event, and reliving the event in a way that makes it feel present (such as flashbacks), and marked mental and physiological distress (though not always both at the same time) that comes from stimuli that relate to the event, persistent avoidance to stimuli that relate to the event, negative changes in an individual's cognitions, and changes in an individual's arousal and reactivity (American Psychiatric Association, pp.271 – 272, 2013).

It is important to note that despite the precise nature of the definition and symptoms of PTSD found in the DSM-V, it is questionable to utilise real-world medical definitions to diagnose a fictional character. However, the point of interest here is that a superhero who, in the comics is regularly referred to as 'invincible', is shown to be suffering from a mental health disorder, something which is not referred to within traditional theological discussions of Christianity in relation to Jesus Christ and God, thereby showing the humanity of Stark.

Throughout *Iron Man 3,* Stark displays most, if not all of the aforementioned symptoms in some regard or another. Starting with the traumatic experience itself, Stark's battle with PTSD begins as a result of events that occur in *Avengers Assemble.* Towards the climax of *Avengers Assemble*, the World Security Council, as part of S.H.I.E.L.D., order a nuclear strike on New York to end the battle with the Chitauri. Iron Man, in turn, takes the nuke and sends it towards the Chitauri mothership. In doing so, he risks his life in a way that causes him to undergo another near-death

experience. However, unlike in *Iron Man*, he now has a defensive persona that was in action when he suffered the near-death experience, and so has no way of further compensating. In spite of this, he attempts to compensate for the second time, by obsessively creating more and more Iron Man suits, having created forty-two of them in total, a further thirty-five from the Mark VII that he used in *Avengers Assemble*. This is representative of his PTSD because Pamilla Ramsden claims that victims of PTSD will 'often over-engage in activities or work in order to keep themselves intensely occupied' (p.311, 2013). This over-engagement in his work of creating Iron Man suits acts as evidence for his PTSD, and furthermore, displays the way in which he relies on the Iron Man persona to help keep him protected. Likewise, referring back to the analogy of Stark's basement as representing his unconscious, *Iron Man 3* shows Stark's house being destroyed as a representation of his mental breakdown as a result of his PTSD, further showing the breakdown of his unconscious, as well as the loss of his defence mechanism in the form of the Iron Man suits that are lost when his house is destroyed, something which he soon temporarily loses access to after his house is destroyed, only regaining them at the end of the film. If the basement represents his unconscious, then it only stands to reason that all that is above within his house represents the conscious mind, and as such, the destruction of Stark's house represents a complete breakdown of the psyche, not just his unconscious mind.

Returning to the symptoms of PTSD, as outlined by the DSM – V, one key symptom that relates to Stark's obsessive creation of the Iron Man suits is that of negative changes in the individual's cognitions, which can be furthered to specifically include a negative emotional state, such as fear. As a result of the Battle of New York in *Avengers Assemble*, Stark feels a constant sense of fear that leads to him feeling like him by himself is no longer enough to protect Earth, and that there is a greater threat. Despite him later discovering that he was correct, specifically with regards to there being a bigger threat, his obsessive behaviour was self-destructive at the same time, and it was only through his ability to collaborate with others, especially in spite of losing his Iron Man suit, that he was able to regain his sense of self and return to standard mental functioning. Similarly, his loss of his Iron Man suit is representative of his loss of a defence mechanism that initially enabled him to be able to cope with his sense of vulnerability, which in turn is heightened by his PTSD. Furthermore, the activation of Stark's 'Blank Slate' protocol at the end of the film, that results in the

destruction of his suits that were created as a result of his obsessive behaviour, represents his desire to start again after overcoming his mental illness by ridding himself of who he was when affected by PTSD.

Stark's vulnerable human side, in conjunction with the God persona of Iron Man, creates a character that represents both humanity and God. This displays the way in which the character acts as an apt example of the way in which traditional Christianity has been replaced by superhero worship. Furthermore, Stark's later acceptance of his vulnerability is the key to achieving his true potential as a hero. This is a strong contrast with the vulnerability-fearing Tony Stark found at the beginning of *Iron Man*, and displays his character development. As Campbell states: 'Transformation, fluidity, not stubborn ponderosity, is the characteristic of the living God' (p.289). This displays the way in which Tony Stark/Iron Man can only be truly fulfilled as a person, hero, and God by changing from the vulnerability-fearing man-child he was in *Iron Man* into the hero who accepts his death in whatever form it may take, saving the universe in the process. Further from this, Stark's acceptance of his own vulnerability allows him to become part of a team with others by opening himself up to them, in turn displaying his fluidity in adapting himself towards a path that is more likely to lead to victory. However, what is more important about this collaboration is that he does it without the Iron Man persona at his disposal, once again mirroring his position at the start of *Iron Man*, where he is helpless, unless he is willing to accept the help of another.

The message of the character of Tony Stark/Iron Man is that in order to truly succeed, one must work as a team with others, and if they are to do that successfully, they must be open, and therefore vulnerable with each other. A key example of this is in *Age of Ultron*, where, upon discovering that Stark had created Ultron, the rest of the Avengers argue with him about him having kept the project a secret. Stark then retells his trauma from *Avengers Assemble* and how he created Ultron as a response and means of defending the Earth against the coming galactic threats. Doing so is a moment of vulnerability with his team, and becomes the first step towards working to stop Ultron, especially later on in the same scene when Stark asks the team "how they plan on beating that," in reference to the aforementioned threats, to which Steve Rogers replies "together", and later tells Stark that if they lose, they will "do that

together too." Given Stark and Rogers rivalry throughout the MCU, this displays the way in which Rogers approach to victory is through teamwork, which, given that Stark has never won a major battle within the MCU by himself, is proven to be the effective method. The message of the character is that in opening up to one another and displaying vulnerability is the only way to truly achieve the height of one's true potential, in spite of how difficult that may be. It can even be said that Stark's reluctance to display vulnerability and open up to others is in fact more dangerous, given the number of times that working on his own has nearly cost him his life. When battling Thanos on Titan, the closest the team comes to succeeding in stopping him is when they all work as a team to try and pull the Infinity Gauntlet off his hand. When that fails however, Stark falls back on his old habit of going it alone, which, while he certainly fights Thanos longer than anyone else in a one-on-one battle, still results in him coming the closest to death since his near-death experience in *Avengers Assemble*. This displays the way in which Stark needs to work with others, despite any hesitancy he has about the prospect. This required adherence to teamwork as an avoidance to the dangers of vulnerability is what combines the Stark and Iron Man personas, as they both need others to succeed, and this is where the humanity of the character outweighs the godliness.

While God can accomplish His own goals, he is often found to be doing so without help, not counting when he manipulates or requests other people to do their bidding for them, which may not be defined as teamwork without the openness found to be required within the Avengers, humans often need to work together to accomplish their goals, and for superheroes like Iron Man, this is no different. However, it is not only an acceptance of teamwork that is required of Stark to be a successful superhero, but also an acceptance of his own vulnerability in the face of his enemies. This means that, not only does Stark need to learn to overcome this fear, which he does, but also become a hero in a way that requires no help from others. This is shown in *Avengers: Endgame,* when he wields the Infinity Stones to finish the battle between the Avengers and Thanos by reducing Thanos and his forces to dust, just as Thanos did in *Infinity War*. However, unlike their one-on-one fight in *Infinity War*, Stark looks Thanos in the eye without his helmet, displaying his vulnerability, as well as accepting his death, by acknowledging that he would not survive using the Gauntlet, for Campbell claims that the hero would not be a hero if he feared death (p.306).

Furthermore, his final statement of "I am Iron Man" in this instance is not an attempt to convince himself or others of his invincibility as earlier statements may have been, but an affirmation of his two personas becoming individuated. This shows the way in which the characters of Iron Man and Stark are united in that they both require to be vulnerable in order to be successful, regardless of whether or not they are working as part of a team. While Iron Man may possess superhuman abilities that make him more god than man, and, in a way, worth worshipping, Stark lacks such abilities, and as such, acknowledges his own abilities as a human that allow him to act in a pro-social manner without his superhero persona.

The Family as an Embodiment of God and the Guardians of the Galaxy

As has been touched upon throughout this thesis, but will be the focus of this section, superheroes are commonly depicted as coming from non-nuclear and problematic families, an example of the latter being Tony Stark's turbulent relationship with his father, with many of them being orphans as a result of the death of their parents. While this acts heavily as a motivator for the majority of superheroes, as with many common traits of superheroes, this originates as a result of society at the time of inception, most notably as a result of the impact of America's involvement in WWII, as was discussed in the introduction. This led to the common issue of many children growing up without their fathers, and who were consequently looking for a paternal figure to identify with. As a result, children, and later, adults, were able to use superheroes as a replacement of such, as many of them were idealized versions of paternal figures. After the end of WWII, this is a concept that continued throughout the twentieth century and has continued into the twenty-first century as a result of the subsequent breakdown of the nuclear family. Despite the nuclear family being an unattainable ideal, this breakdown was different due to the objective evidence of its breakdown, such as the increase in divorce rates that came about as a result of more lax divorce laws such as the Divorce Act of 1969. Although divorce rates are difficult to track, with figure 1 in Sheela Kennedy and Steven Ruggles' study of divorce trends showing certain periods as having a low number of studies in the subject, the most recent period being 1996 to 2010, (p.589, 2014), the general trend is that around half of marriages end in divorce, according to Stephanie Coontz (p.3, 1992). The key reason for this was the increase in divorce that occurred for a number of reasons. As divorce increased, so did the child's desire for consistently present parental figures that could no longer exist, and while WWII gave the children a lack of a father that they could cope with in the sense of them either one day returning, or that they could envisage as bravely dying for their country, divorce held no such idealization of absent parents, and so led to children feeling a sense of abandonment. Firstly, it is important to note why the divorce rate increased, as knowing such can help explain why it did so, and as a result, why superheroes have maintained such popularity. In the US, the initiation of no-fault divorces meant that divorces no longer required evidence or reason for a divorce, and that the couple, for whatever reason, could legally separate because of marital breakdowns that were a result of no harmful actions, such as infidelity or

abuse. As a result, studies, such as Paul A. Nakonezny, Robert D. Shull and Joseph Lee Rodgers, show that since the initiation of no-fault divorces, divorce as a whole increased from the mid-sixties to the early eighties (p.486, 1995). Consequently, more divorces emerged, with around half of all marriages ending in divorces which were instigated after 20 years of marriage at the most (Bramlett and Mosher, as quoted in Strow, Claudia W. and Strow, Brian K. p.239, 2006). While a separated family is nothing new, with Coontz arguing that the family has always been a fluctuating institution, with most beliefs about the family being a result of nostalgic misconceptions (p.2), the separated family in later years was caused by the fact that it was a personal choice to leave the family, as opposed to being seen as leaving the family for an altruistic reason, such as fighting in WWII. This created the aforementioned sense of parental abandonment, causing children to question as to why they were being abandoned by their parents when there was nothing visibly wrong to them.

These trends of divorce in relation to the concept of parental abandonment is an idea which was reflected in superhero media. While superheroes would rarely have their parents leave, instead with them dying, children could still identify with the superheroes through their status as orphans, and with many of the heroes struggling with the issues of abandonment years later, despite them not being abandoned by choice. Furthermore, many children not only saw superheroes as a paternal replacement, but also, as a result of their lacking parents, identified with them on a personal level. This is mirrored in religious contexts through the idea of secularization, and the furthered concept that God is not only problematic in their presence, as has been illustrated throughout this thesis, and will be elaborated further on a parental as well as religious basis, but also that they are problematic through their absence. As the nuclear family unit declined, so did religiosity. One reason for this, it could be said, is that if people could be abandoned by their biological father, then it is not impossible that the same could be for their holy father. This is supported by David C. Dollahite, Loren D. Marks, and Hilary Dalton, who claimed that followers of religion experienced God as 'an intimate friend, comforter, guide, and healer,' while likewise, also claiming that he is 'an imposing lord, lawgiver, king, judge, ruler who brings order and justice to the world' (p.227, 2018). These views of God are similar to how father figures are also expected to be, displaying how God and the father are sometimes seen as similar

in terms of roles and expectations. While this is obviously not the only reason for secularization, the parallel trends point to it being one of the key reasons.

One way in which the MCU has tackled the concept of the modern family is with the superhero team, the Guardians of the Galaxy. Introduced cinematically in 2014, *Guardians of the Galaxy* told the story of a group of intergalactic outlaws who came together to save the galaxy. While the members of the group could not be more different from each other in many ways, one commonality between the group is their turbulent family lives or lack of family life altogether. Examples include Peter Quill/Star-Lord's mother dying at the beginning of the first film and his absent, and later abusive father, Gamora's deceased family, and her abusive adoptive father Thanos, Drax's dead family at the hands of Ronan the Accuser and Thanos, and Rocket (Bradley Cooper) and Groot (Vin Diesel) are without families at all, with Rocket shown to have attachment issues. As all members of the team are superheroes, it can be claimed that they not only fulfil the role of a parental figure, but also as familial figures as a whole, holding a malleable nature to their roles, changing them as and when is necessary. However, the prospect of familial figures having a malleable nature preceded the *Guardians of the Galaxy* films, as shown by preceding cinematic examples, such as *The Wizard of Oz* (Directed by Victor Fleming, 1939). This is supported by R.D. Laing, who claimed that 'the more one studies family dynamics, the more *un*clear one becomes as to the ways *family* dynamics compare and contrast with the dynamics of other groups not called families, let alone the ways families themselves differ' (p.3, 1971). This is to imply the idea that the family is not completely different to other prosocial groups in society, especially when the family has been shown to have darker aspects, such as abuse. For example, Groot acts as a parent to Rocket in *Guardians of the Galaxy*, but in *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2,* (Directed by James Gunn, 2017) Rocket acts as a parent for Groot, displaying the malleable nature of this new and varied form of family.

It is also relevant to discuss what is meant when the family is discussed as an embodiment of God. In this context, it is to discuss the ways in which the various positions and roles of the family are also perceived as attributes of God, and how they can be related to liberal and conservative interpretations of both. It has already been

discussed how Thanos relates to this in relation to his daughters, Gamora and Nebula, specifically in terms of how his position as a father and God are amalgamated. However, this chapter will focus more on that relationship from the perspective of Gamora and Nebula, and go further into detail about how that relationship has had a long-term damaging effect on them. Likewise, this chapter will also focus on how similar relationships can be equally damaging in different ways, such as that of Ego and Quill's. From here, this chapter will discuss how that damage can impact on individual perceptions of God, and the analogous relationships between the father and the child.

Similarly, archetype theory can be applied in relation to the Guardians of the Galaxy, as the Guardians are a group, and therefore, archetype theory is best applied to them in the sense of each of them representing an archetype, and consequently, the group as a whole representing a psyche. In this sense, the Guardians can therefore be likened to a family in the sense that if a familial figure is missing, then the individual can feel like they lack fulfilment in their own internal archetype. The Guardians therefore provide the positive message that if a biological family figure cannot fulfil an archetypal need, then a non-biological family member can, allowing an individual the possibility to achieve fulfilment and come closer to achieving individuation. It is important here to reiterate that individuation is a state which is as close to godhood as humanity can achieve, regardless of whether or not it comes as a group, or an individual, and is therefore relevant to this thesis. Furthermore, the Guardians as superheroes also acts as replacement familial figures for each other, creating their own reconstituted family that allows them to still achieve the benefits reaped by being part of a traditional family, but without the deterministic nature of biological families. As Kaveney claims, many superheroes acquire 'families of the heart,' which are either groups who surround the superheroes and aid them, or they are superheroes working together as a group (p.9b). The Guardians of the Galaxy fulfil this by being exactly that, as a group of superheroes who work together, but at the same time, still acting as a positive family model for each other, with them even arguing on occasion. As has been stated, family is a concept that permeates superhero culture, but is best embodied through the Guardians of the Galaxy, most notably in the second film, wherein Drax states that they are not friends, but they are family, in

spite of their bad moments, which in turn relates back to the idea of familial archetypes.

Continuing on the discussion of the family within the Guardians of the Galaxy, it is important to relate them back to archetype theory. As was mentioned, each of the Guardians function as an archetypal part of a full psyche, and consequently, when taken in conjunction with Kaveney's families of the heart, acts as evidence of how an individuated psyche, and likewise, how families can be an embodiment of God. Similarly, as is discussed in Campbell's Monomyth, the Guardians have fluid archetypal roles that allow them to change which archetype they represent as the narrative goes on. While this will be discussed later in more detail, one example of this is Groot, who, as mentioned earlier, starts the first *Guardians* film as a father archetype, to complement Rocket's child archetype, but these roles become swapped in the second *Guardians* film. Likewise, Quill goes from the child archetype at the start of the first film, to the hero by the end of the first film, back to the child in the second film, and finally, becoming the father archetype at the end of the second film. This shows how the *Guardians* franchise displays the transformation from one archetype to another. Likewise, the Monomyth generally tends to only discuss stories that possess one heroic character and one heroic arc, as opposed to the multiple heroes with individual character arcs. As a result of this, it is also important to discuss the history of the family of the heart, to continue to use Kaveney's phrase, within the history of cinema. This idea of a family of the heart consistent throughout the history of cinema, with many cinematic heroes journeying away from their biological families, and gaining new ones, an idea that stretches all the way back to *The Wizard of Oz,* a film that ironically enough is also claimed to be a criticism of religion, with the Wizard's (Frank Morgan) lies and own persona being seen as an allegory for the falsehoods of Christianity. Within, Dorothy (Judy Garland) unwillingly leaves her own family behind after an argument over her dog, Toto, and after a tornado takes her to the magical land of Oz, she finds another family in the form of the unusual people she meets along the way. This prospect of a found family in cinema has been continued for many years, including the previously mentioned *Star Wars*, and the subject of this section, the Guardians of the Galaxy. Reynolds emphasises this by stating that, if an archetype is not fulfilled or activated by the biological family member, then the individual will seek out substitute figures in the wider world, to varying degrees of

success (p.79). While Reynolds focuses on the father archetype in this instance, there is no reason why it cannot be relevant to other archetypal needs as well.

It is also important to discuss the ways in which the *Guardians of the Galaxy* franchise continues with the previously established ideas of superheroes as messianic figures within popular culture. As was discussed earlier in the thesis in relation to Thanos, it is common for many superhero characters to be depicted as messianic characters, particularly with a Christian frame of reference. This is seemingly a result of the conglomeration of superheroes as an American creation, mixed in with the high levels of Christian belief in American society, which is also ironic given that many of them were created by Jewish immigrants. However, while Thanos was discussed in relation to superheroes as messianic with referral to a Christian God, this section will deal with superheroes as Christ-like figures instead. The key example of this from the Guardians of the Galaxy is Peter Quill. Born of a Celestial father and human mother, his parentage mirrors that of Jesus Christ himself, a man born of immaculate conception by God and Mary, with Quill's mother even referring to his father as "an angel," giving a Christian implication. Before continuing with this topic, it is important to explain what the Celestials are. The Celestials have been rarely depicted in the MCU thus far, with the exceptions of Ego and a brief scene of Eson the Searcher in *Guardians of the Galaxy*. These brief depictions show them as megalomaniacal and in search of further power, with Eson's brief appearance showing him wielding the Power Stone, one of the six Infinity Stones, and using it to destroy a planet. Likewise, Quill's ethereal abilities, which were discovered in the first *Guardians of the Galaxy* film, where his Celestial parentage resulted in his ability to hold the Power Stone with the other Guardians for a longer period of time than he should have been able to, and were developed upon in the second film with his father, Ego the Living Planet, training him on how to use them to greater effect, displays his separation from the rest of humanity in his greater capabilities. Likewise, Quill's representation of the aforementioned child archetype in the films is related to Bassil-Morozow's claim that the child archetype is representative of the future hero, and that 'many mythological saviours are child gods' (p.42, 2017), a statement that is especially relevant to Quill and his Celestial powers that are revealed in the second film. Similarly, these abilities also mirror how the Bible claims Jesus' ability to perform miracles, acts that were

impossible by the rest of humanity, such as the transformation of water to wine, or the raising of the dead in the case of Lazarus.

One aspect of God embodying a family member is the idea of God as the father in the *Guardians* films, particularly that of the absent father. It is important to address the ways in which different paternal figures in relation to the Guardians of the Galaxy are represented, so as to understand how they act as different embodiments of the relationship between God and man, and how they can be perceived. The idea of an absent father representation is shown most prominently in *Guardians of the Galaxy, Vol. 2*, with Quill finally learning the identity of his father as Ego the Living Planet. Ego, within the MCU, is a Celestial, which is an MCU equivalent of a god. In the case of Ego, him being represented as a god through his Celestial status, and also having been an absent father, represents the idea of an absent god, and the idea that humanity has given up on God because of their lack of presence and empirical evidence on Earth. One example of this is shown when Ego first introduces himself to the Guardians. After this meeting, Quill and Gamora have a discussion in the woods where they debate the idea of Ego truly being his father, and if he is, why it took him so long to find Quill. This connotes the idea of being sceptical about finding God, when there is so much evidence to indicate that he never cared, or did not exist. Furthermore, when Gamora confronts the idea of him being evil, she simply states "we kill him," mirroring the Nietzschean sentiment of 'God is dead.' (p.41a, 2003). Furthermore, Friedrich Nietzsche goes on to claim that the 'superman,' sometimes known in his writing as the Ubermensch or Overman, will take over from the now-dead God as an aspiration of man (p.41b), an idea that is foreshadowed in the aforementioned scene, as Quill is the one to kill his father, and is a superhero himself, displaying the 'superman' killing God. This is an idea that, in relation to the Thanos section of this thesis, furthers the idea that the MCU depicts gods as evil, and as will be expanded upon later, links this into the idea of God as the father. Furthermore, Quill's mother, Meredith, refers to his father in the opening scene of *Guardians of the Galaxy* as an "angel," which again reinforces the idea of the father as a religious entity. Likewise, the setting of the scene in 1988 also connotes the idea that thinking of gods in a positive light is a past idea, and is later reinforced by Ego's evil nature revealed in the sequel which is set in 2014, the same year as the first film.

Furthered from the issue of Ego as an absent father, once Quill is reunited with him, he is also depicted as an abusive father. The first way this is done is through the reveal of his previous children under the planet's surface. After Nebula and Gamora's fight leads them underneath the surface of Ego's planet, they discover a darkened cave filled with skeletons that they realise were Ego's previous children. The placement of them underneath the planet's surface, along with the dark lighting, further infers the idea of Ego trying not only to hide his victims from any future progeny that may hold the power to help him carry out his plan, but also as a way of hiding his mistakes, and the children who were deemed too weak to help him. This idea, much like the previously mentioned idea of Stark's basement as a representation of the unconscious, places the deaths of his children into his unconscious mind, both in a public and personal sense. Furthermore, when contrasted with the Stark-basement analogy, Ego's positioning of his dead children under the surface of the planet displays the different ways in which the act of hiding something in the unconscious can be done for varying reasons, with the reasons from the former example given being self-protection for the sake of fear, and the reason for the latter example being self-protection for the purpose of one's own megalomaniacal goals. Similarly, Ego's murder and cover up of his earlier children can be related to the way in which Christianity has been shown to try and cover up their criminal behaviour, such as the child abuse cases enacted by Catholic priests. Likewise, Ego furthers this by the fact that he shows no remorse for his actions, prioritising his plan over his children, and viewing his children as tools rather than family members. This further displays him as abusive in that Ego prioritises his plans for what he perceives to be universally altruistic over their children.

Another way in which Ego is represented as an abusive father is through the way in which he acts emotionally manipulative towards Quill. This is done through the way in which he retroactively gives Quill his deepest desires in having the two of them play catch with a ball of energy, as well as Ego changing his appearance to fit David Hasselhoff, a celebrity who Quill would tell other children that was his real father when he felt insecure about his lack of a paternal figure. This is reflective of a conversation that Quill and Gamora have previously when Quill has doubts over Ego as his real father, and tells her what his father-less childhood was like for him. Whether or not Ego was able to know Quill's sadness over these absences is unclear,

but regardless, Ego is able to emotionally manipulate Quill by giving him what he missed from his childhood, so as to coerce him into helping him with his plan. This displays the way in which Ego is abusive, not just through his physical actions, but also through emotional manipulation, further establishing Ego as an abusive father.

Similarly, Quill also displays many paternal issues in relation to Yondu as well as Ego. However, it must be stated that while Yondu is represented as an abusive parent in the first *Guardians of the Galaxy*, his character was expanded upon in the sequel, to the point where it could be claimed that he was the best paternal figure for Quill. In the first *Guardians* film, Yondu is represented as a problematic paternal figure, through his repeated reminder to Quill that he 'saved his life' by stopping the rest of the crew from eating him. This is indicative of an abusive relationship, as it claims that the abuser was a necessity to the best that the victim could have, and likewise that they prevented the worst from happening to the victim. Despite the abusive nature of his actions, the second film shows that Yondu does in fact care for Quill, though it is not as obvious as first displayed. This is further shown through the number of times that, despite Quill's betrayal of Yondu, he continues to protect him by refusing to kill him on a number of occasions. Although this is just a repetition of his earlier actions of 'saving his life,' this physically shows that Yondu cares for Quill, as opposed to the word-of-mouth acknowledgment of it that is present in the first *Guardians* film. However, the extent of Yondu's love for Quill is most shown via his self-sacrifice at the end of *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2*. At the end of *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2*, Yondu rescues Quill with the full acknowledgment that he would not be able to survive, and in doing so, apologises for not being the best father, but also being proud that he was his son. This acknowledgment is designed to emphasise the idea that just because someone is someone's biological father, does not mean that they are the father they deserve or need. Furthermore, the cinematography of the scene further emphasises their relationship through a series of close-ups that frame the scene from the perspective of Quill, until they both are outside of the atmosphere of Ego's planet, at which point the perspective is swapped between Yondu and Quill. This is used to aid in his paternal identification, which is not truly met until the end of *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2*, wherein he identifies with Yondu after Ego is found to be an unsuitable father figure.

Likewise, returning to Quill's parental relationships, it is also important to discuss the lesser-seen relationship he has with his mother, Meredith Quill, and subsequently, the way her death affects him. One effect displayed is his search for a sense of catharsis in relation to his mother's death. As his mother is dying, she requests him to take his hand, which he declines. Accepting her hand means accepting the reality of her death, which he does not want to do, so as to avoid a greater sense of parental abandonment already planted within him by his absent father, unaware of the futility of his active refusal. Instead he opts to run away from the situation, ultimately resulting in him becoming a wandering hero, which Jung claims are often in search of the nostalgic feeling of the 'lost mother' (p.5). Furthermore, his refusal of her death is also shown by her giving him a present, which he does not open, as opening a present made to soften the blow of her death would also mean accepting it. Quill's main arc of the first film is that of accepting his mother's death, and this is displayed towards the end of *Guardians of the Galaxy,* when Quill seizes the Power Stone. As he does so, Gamora tells him to take her hand, resulting in Quill experiencing a flashback to his mother the day she died telling him to do the same. This flashback not only prompts him to take her hand, allowing him to divide the energy between them, and thus survive wielding the Stone, but also acts as catharsis for Quill in that in finally taking her hand, he accepts her death. This is supported by McSweeney, who states that the prime purpose of this scene is to act as Quill's acceptance of both her death, and of his place in the world, that of a hero (p.177, 2018). This is further shown by him finally opening the present that she gave him at the start of the film, which is revealed to be a second mix tape. Opening the gift, as well as taking her hand, displays his acceptance of his mother's death, finally granting him a sense of catharsis, a point that is supported by Rebekah Brammer, who states that opening the gift acts as a form of acceptance of his grief (p.59, 2019). A point to be further discussed in relation to Quill's relationship with his mother is that his loss of his mother leaves him with a sense of abandonment. One way in which this is displayed is through the cinematography of her death scene, and the camera focuses on Quill, zooming out from a close-up when he is taken out into the hallway to emphasise his sense of loneliness felt without his mother. This is indicative of the sense of abandonment felt by children whose mothers initiated divorces from the child's father and were unable to take them with them, an idea which is furthered by Quill's later abduction by Yondu and the Ravagers at Ego's request.

Further on from discussing Quill's mother, one particular tie between Quill and his familial figures is through music. It is shown early in *Guardians of the Galaxy* that Quill has a strong attachment to music, most of which originates in the sixties and seventies. The reason for this is that it is the music that Meredith would listen to, and wanted to pass on to him, meaning that, in listening to the music, Quill maintains a connection to his mother, even after her death. This connection between himself and his mother through music is shown in the first scene of the first film, when he is shown to be listening to his Walkman in a hospital waiting room, with the music blocking out all other sound, both for him and the audience. In doing so, he is capable of maintaining a connection with his mother, and denying the reality of her fading life. This links him to the past nostalgically, which is supported by Phillip A. Cartwright et al., who asserted the view that nostalgia can be felt through association with earlier generations, such as through parents, which is precisely what Quill does, and can thusly create a sense of nostalgia for a time that he did not have exist during (p.464, 2013). This can be extended out in the sense that the nostalgia of the music can also be linked to the nostalgia of the family. The music comes from a time when divorce started to rise, and likewise, when the traditional nuclear family was still considered the norm. Therefore, the music not only links Quill to his traditional familial members, but also to the nostalgic idea of the family in the same way. It is important to remember here, that Quill has not seen Earth since 1988, and as such, will abide by the Western norms of the time.

Furthermore, keeping the meaning of the music to the cinematic universe, Quill displays his attachment to his mother through music through his protective nature towards his Walkman. The Walkman, by modern standards, is an outdated form of listening to music portably, and as such, acts as another connection to the past. This is first shown in the first film, when he acts aggressively to a prison guard in the Kyln who uses it, however, it is shown in more depth in *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2*, in the scene where Ego both reveals that he killed Meredith, and crushes Quill's Walkman. The reveal of her death, mixed with the destruction of the Walkman, acts as a reinforcement of the attempted physical severance between Quill and his mother since her death, as it rids him of the one item that connects him to her. Furthermore, the connection to Quill's parental figures through music is also shown through him

later gaining a Zune, which was intended to be a gift from Yondu prior to his death. The gaining of the Zune after Yondu's death, as well as the use of the song 'Father and Son' by Cat Stevens (1970), shows how Quill uses music as a means of connection with his parental figures, and by extension, his family as a whole. Furthermore, as Quill is listening to the song, Baby Groot takes one of the earphones and listens to it himself, further showing how music is used to connect Quill with not just his parental family members, but now it is also being used to connect him to his family as a whole, further showing that the family is a malleable concept. Furthermore, the abandonment felt by New Hollywood cinema directors like Spielberg as a result of the aforementioned absentee fathers during WWII is referenced nostalgically by Gunn in the *Guardians of the Galaxy* films for the films that were created by the directors themselves, which regularly featured fatherlessness as a theme.

Another example of problematic paternal figures in the *Guardians* films is Thanos, who is the father figure to Gamora and Nebula. Taking the earlier idea of Thanos as a god, this depicts the idea of God as abusive and cruel to those on Earth, as well as those who believe in them, which in turn, links Thanos to the idea of God as the father, and, likewise, the idea of him as an abusive father. Starting with the relationship between Thanos and his daughters Gamora and Nebula, he treats both of these two characters in drastic contrasts with each other, with Gamora being seen as the "favourite daughter," while Nebula is seen by him as a disappointment. As is reiterated throughout the MCU, Thanos forced his daughters to train together in violent battles that often resulted in Gamora winning over Nebula, which would then result in Thanos dismantling Nebula and replacing her body parts with machinery in an attempt to improve her. Helena L. Martin claims that this physical change is a way of visually encoding Nebula as having a 'corrupt soul, the limbs missing from her body implying that something is missing from her morality, as well' (p.456). This change can be seen as internalised, as she gains a hatred of Gamora, as she perceived Gamora's victories over her as her desire to win, regardless of the repercussions it had for Nebula, but also led to further battles between the sisters. In *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2*, when the two are reunited on Ego's planet, where they fight until they land beneath the planet's surface. Here, Nebula overpowers Gamora in battle after Gamora lowers her guard after having saved Nebula from her burning spaceship. After this, Nebula demands that Gamora admits that she has been bested in combat; while

this does not happen, what does happen is that Nebula admits that all she wanted was a sister, while she believed that Gamora just wanted to win. This admittance underneath the planet's surface represents the idea that this has been a long-repressed thought process that had just become conscious, with Nebula perceiving Gamora as just having done this for her in all the time they had known each other. This leads to Nebula revealing the extent of Thanos's abuse towards her, and how she blames Gamora for what happened. However, the end of the film reveals a reconciliation between the two sisters, with Gamora revealing her side of the conflict, and how she did not consider the effects that it had upon Nebula, apologising, and proclaiming that Nebula "will always be her sister." Furthermore, Gamora invites Nebula to join the Guardians and help protect those that are just as vulnerable as she was, to which Nebula replies that she "will help them by killing Thanos," which connotes that Nebula's anger towards Gamora has been moved towards Thanos, her true abuser. Gamora's victories over her sister were never what Nebula hated about losing, but the implications of what that meant for her were her true fear, displaying how Nebula had displaced her anger towards the one she perceived as causing her abuse, as opposed to her abuser himself. This abusive paternal relationship depicts the way in which God themselves can be abusive, with many begging the question as to why God makes them suffer, with many finding it easier to accuse others of causing their suffering, as opposed to attacking God himself. Consequently, Nebula displays this through joining the battle of Titan in *Infinity War* against Thanos.

Nebula's act of killing her 2014 version of herself in *Avengers: Endgame* also acts to display the way in which she refuses to allow herself to be an abuse victim anymore. In *Endgame*, Thanos, along with his army, time travel from the year 2014 to 2023 to stop the Avengers from undoing his act of destroying half of life. During this, he swaps the 2014 and 2023 versions of Nebula as a means of stealing the Infinity Stones from the Avengers without them noticing. This later leads to a stand-off between Gamora and the two Nebulas, wherein 2023 Nebula shoots the 2014 Nebula. This form of self-murder acts to serve as a metaphor for Nebula's own character development from that of an abuse victim, to a self-sufficient survivor, a transformation furthered by 2014 Nebula stating that, she cannot change because Thanos would not let her. This is furthered by Laing likening the family to 'a web' and 'a tomb' (p.6), which emphasises the idea that Nebula feels trapped by her familial relationship with

Thanos. Furthermore, the aforementioned statement about Thanos not letting her change not only defines the 2014 Nebula, but her death after quickly trying to kill Gamora shows how 2023 Nebula is so far removed from who she used to be that she has no issue with killing her, as she sees her as a different person.

While *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2* allows Nebula to come more to terms with the reality of her abuse, Gamora still struggles later on with her abusive relationship with Thanos as a father, which is shown heavily in *Infinity War*. During *Infinity War*, prior to her capture by Thanos, Gamora is shown to have purple lighting over her face, particularly when she is telling the rest of the Guardians and Thor about her past with Thanos, as well as when she makes Quill promise to kill her if Thanos captures her. Barsam and Monahan likewise claim that one of the key purposes of lighting in film is to 'reveal a character's state of mind' (p.39). This shows how the purple lighting is used to represent the way in which Gamora still feels Thanos's influence over her life, and her own awareness of her forward path towards reuniting with him. She re-emphasises this by stating that "whatever happens, the path we're on leads to Thanos," showing her awareness of her potential fate. Prior to her making Quill sacrifice her should Thanos take her, she remembers when she first met Thanos and went under his wing as a child. In this memory, she is met by Thanos when she has lost her mother while Thanos's forces invade the planet. In this meeting, Thanos gently takes her by the hand, tells her that she is "quite the fighter," and leads her away from the scenes of genocide, protecting her from her potential death in the process. He then gifts her a double-bladed knife, and uses it to distract her from half of her race being killed, all the while also using it to teach her about his philosophy of universal balance. In this process, Thanos not only shows himself to her as a protector, but also a teacher, two attributes that are expected from paternal and religious figures. As a result, Gamora's relationship with Thanos as a father figure is complicated, as she not only remembers him as a kind-hearted soul that protected her from death, but also because she knows him as a violent murderer, who desires to kill half the universe for the sake of his vision of balance. This complication is later displayed when Gamora believes that she has killed Thanos with the same knife that she was gifted many years ago. After the assumed murder, where Thanos later reveals that he merely used the Reality Stone to make it appear as though he had been killed, Gamora cries at his death, with Thanos asking "is that sadness I sense in you,

daughter?" This question not only displays that Thanos is also aware of her feelings about him, but also that he still considers her his daughter, a statement that reminds Gamora of their relationship as parent and child. This also displays the complex relationship between abuse victim and abusive parent, in that Gamora is upset at his death, in spite of her being fully aware of the way in which he was abusive as a parent.

The key moment that defines Thanos as an abusive parent towards Gamora however, is in *Infinity War*, when Thanos kills her for the Soul Stone. One of the requirements that need to be fulfilled for Thanos to obtain all six Infinity Stones is for him to sacrifice that which he loves as a means to get the Soul Stone, which, for him is Gamora. Initially, Gamora is gleeful at this news, as she holds the perception that Thanos does not love anyone, and as such, cannot gain the Soul Stone. However, as he turns to her with tears, she discovers that Thanos does in fact love her, despite his abusive actions. This helps to further illustrate the complex relationship present between abuser and victim, as what Thanos sees as love, Gamora sees as abuse, with Gamora even stating that "this isn't love." This shows how, when taken in conjunction with their first meeting, violence within an early family life can lead to the normalisation of the behaviour, leading to it becoming a part of the child's adult life as well (Ehrensaft, Diane. et al., as quoted in Herrenkohl, Todd Ian. and Jung, Hyunzee. p.306, 2016). This can also be taken together with Nebula's initial representation as violent and vengeful towards Gamora, along with the sisters' violent past, to further substantiate Ehrensaft's claim. This also presents the prospect that the abuser may not be aware that the actions they are performing are abusive, with an important aspect to abuse being the definition of abuse from the victim. Similarly, in spite of this, Thanos still performs actions that indicate his care for her. One example of this is in the scene between Thanos and Gamora where, as they discuss their lives prior to Gamora's departure from Thanos's ranks, she tells him that she hated his throne, to which he responds by opting to sit on the stairs to his throne. This acts as an indication of Thanos's acknowledgement of Gamora's feelings, and further as an indication for his care and love for her, despite him also performing abusive actions, which further displays the complex nature of parental abuse.

As has been discussed with regards to Nebula and Gamora, the *Guardians of the Galaxy* films also deal with the issue of the effects that can be had upon an individual when they deal with an abusive upbringing. This is most notably displayed through Rocket, who says in the first film that he "didn't ask to get made" or "torn apart and put back together over and over and turned into some little monster." This statement is representative of the way in which Rocket's upbringing as an experiment traumatised him to the point that he perceives himself as unnatural, which in turn, gives him a negative self-image. Furthermore, describing himself as being "torn apart" and "being put back together" also likens him to a Frankenstein-esque monster, which in turn, along with his anthropomorphic disposition, displays him as a human, while the scientists that did so can be put in the position of God, such is the case with the original story of *Frankenstein* (Shelley, M. 1818). Furthermore, Rocket's constant request for other people's prosthetic body parts, albeit humorous, could be seen as a displacement strategy, as a way of displaying his want to be complete again, despite it being a pointless act, in that it would continue his perceived cycle of destruction and reconstruction. This is displayed in *Infinity War*, when he asks Bucky Barnes how much his prosthetic arm would cost, which Barnes refuses, to which Rocket adamantly claims that he will "get that arm." This is indicative of the Lacanian concept of 'Lack,' which is the idea that individuals go through life with a sense of missing something, and for Rocket, this is his wholeness that was present before the first time he was taken apart. He searches for the parts that will enable him to be 'whole' again, but, as Lacan further states, Lack will always go unfulfilled, with John Storey stating it to be 'an endless quest in search of an imagined moment of plenitude' (p.105a, 2018). This is the reason for his kind act of giving Thor a prosthetic eye in *Avengers: Infinity War*. Rocket perceives earlier in the scene that Thor has lost all of his biological family, and as such, attempts to treat him as part of his emotional family, similar to the one he has with the rest of the Guardians. This leads to him giving Thor a spare prosthetic eye in an act that shows him attempting to help someone who has lost everything be whole again, hoping to fulfil Thor's Lack as best he can. Storey further goes on to state that Lack is symptomized through the act of consolation through 'substitute objects' (p.105b), such as the prosthetics that Rocket constantly seeks, displaying how Rocket exemplifies the concept of Lack.

Returning to the concept of Rocket's poor self-image, this is further reinforced within him by other characters referring to him negatively, such as his referencing to Drax calling him "vermin" and Gamora calling him "rodent," both of which have the implication of him being needed to be exterminated, which leads to him having a poor self-image. This negative self-image, likewise has the impact of trust and relationship issues. Furthermore, the use of a camera that looks up at the other characters frames the abuse from Rocket's perspective, as well as giving the impression of how small he feels. Although the subject of relationship issues is touched on in the Tony Stark/Iron Man section, this is also displayed through Rocket in the *Guardians of the Galaxy* films. This is shown in *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2*, when Rocket and Yondu arrive at Ego's planet, and Yondu tell him that "just a little bit of love makes you realise how empty that hole in you really is." This is in turn an explanation as to why Rocket still acts apprehensive towards the Guardians, as they have a love for each other as family members, but this creates a sense of unease that pushes him away from them, for fear of abandonment and loss. This is reinforced by Purse's claim that the superhero's body is a 'locus for uncertainty and crisis' (p.106), as Rocket is in constant conflict between wanting a family with the Guardians, but is also terrified of losing them at the same time, particularly through rejection as a result of his physical body, as is shown by the aforementioned insults. This is shown most when he has to make the choice to abandon Quill on Ego's planet. As Rocket arrives back with the rest of the Guardians on the ship, Gamora tries to leave to find Quill, which results in Rocket stopping her, stating that "he can only afford to lose one friend today." Furthermore, as Rocket tells the ship to leave, Drax keeps asking Rocket over the intercom "where's Quill?" with the camera focused on Rocket, eventually showing his sad expression, which makes it appear as though it is Rocket's own internal monologue in a way that indicates his shame at abandoning his friend and family member.

While most of what the Guardians films tackle in terms of family are to do with problematic families, one way in which they oppose this is through the heroes themselves. If superheroes are seen as a replacement for God, then it is entirely possible that they can be the godly father to their own internalized families. Laing claims that, as much as a family can be born in the traditional form, there is also an internalized 'family' that affects everyone, though its members all have different subjective opinions on what their relationship is to each other (p.5). The key defining

factor in an internalized family is a family that is brought together by a relation between its members, and the Guardians of the Galaxy conform to this by coming together in a familial structure, but without the blood relations found in traditional families. Their collective relationship thus creates a positive image of a family, despite not holding the traditional nuclear family construct. This is done through the way in which, much like the archetypal roles that the Guardians hold for each other are fluid, so too are the familial roles that they hold for each other. Returning to the relationship between Rocket and Groot, Groot acts as the child to Rocket most notably after his death in *Guardians of the Galaxy*. While he was biologically an adult of his species in the first film, he on occasion acted irresponsibly and in ways that, while not directly harmful to anyone, could not be seen as healthy behaviour, giving the example of drinking from a public fountain at the start of the film. However, after he dies at the end of the film, Rocket preserves one of the sticks left behind of his body, and in turn plants it with the intention of growing it into a new Groot, which is proven to be successful. As the one to plant Groot's remains, Rocket becomes a parent to Groot, indicating a new family template that allows for a dissolution of the traditional mother and father format by amalgamating the role into one. This results in Groot becoming Baby Groot in the sequel, where Rocket's parental role becomes more apparent. In the sequel, Baby Groot is shown to have lesser intelligence than in the original to both emphasise that he is not the same as the Groot of the original film, as well as emphasising his nature as an infant. One example of this is in one particular scene where Yondu and Rocket are being imprisoned by the Ravagers, and ask Baby Groot to retrieve Yondu's prototype fin that will allow him to use his remotely controlled arrow to escape. What ensues is Baby Groot retrieving many different items that display his child-like intelligence, and lack of understanding that would be held by most adults.

The Guardians of the Galaxy within the MCU reflect the changes made to the family throughout the end of the twentieth century and going into the twenty-first. Furthermore, they utilise these changes in the family in a way that also reflects upon the change in relationship between man and God, in that they reflect the way in which humanity now has more varied ideas as to what God is and is not, and can see these ideas in other humans, such as their family members. As an example, people are now able to see the abuse inflicted upon them by family members, and subsequently see

it in deities, and vice versa. These theological conflicts therefore make Kaveney's idea of families of the heart more important in contemporary society because the concept allows for individuals to be selective about who they consider to be close to them, and consequently allows them to avoid those who are toxic influences on their lives. This is shown through Quill's leaving of the Ravagers in favour of the Guardians. While Quill may have always been shown mercy by Yondu when he disobeyed the rules of the Ravagers, which later resulted in a Ravager mutiny for Yondu, showing his position outside of his family of the heart, Quill was nevertheless threatened by Yondu in his childhood, displaying Yondu's toxic nature. He was told that he would be eaten by the other Ravagers, but that Yondu was the one to stop that, thus saving him by his account. This displays how Yondu and the Ravagers were a dangerous influence on Quill's life, and why he left them in favour of the Guardians. However, Quill later returns to them with the Guardians as a means to stop Ronan, as well as helping to save both himself and Gamora from freezing to death in space. This shows how Quill prioritises the Guardians and their more altruistic aims over his original family of the Ravagers, as he discovers a family that are better for him. This shows how an individual can also leave this second family for another non-biological family, as Quill and Gamora both do with their own first non-biological families of the Ravagers and Thanos respectively.

The Guardians also display the way in which the traditional representation of the nuclear family is dissolving, and the concept of the family has evolved from what it was in the twentieth century, to a more fluid concept to the point where individuals can leave their pre-appointed families if they can be deemed unhealthy by the individual in favour of new families that are healthier for the individual. This is further supported by *The Wizard of Oz*, *Star Wars*, and many other preceding films, which, as previously mentioned, have represented newer forms of the family throughout the twentieth century. Quill's search for his father, and not the remainder of his family displays this, as the lack of a father in his early childhood is a continued aspect of his life, whereas he had the rest of his biological family in his childhood prior to being abducted by the Ravagers. He sought merely that small part of his family, as opposed to trying to unite all of his biological families together, displaying a search for a single parent family over everything else. This is shown in *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2,* when he tells Gamora that he has finally found his family, in the form of Ego, only for

her to say "I thought we were your family." This shows how the Guardians and Ego, as far as Quill is concerned at the time, displaying the potential presence of both types of family at once, despite an individual's preference for one over the other. Furthermore, the *Guardians of the Galaxy* films even go so far as to apply the idea of abusive families to the nuclear family itself with the case of Ego, as Quill's biological father, killing his own offspring for the intention of his own gains. While this shows the idea that the *Guardians* films tend to show that biological families are more dangerous and damaging than chosen families, it is more the idea that it is the families that people are forced into that are more damaging. This idea permeates every family found in the *Guardians of the Galaxy* films outside of the titular heroes, from the Ravagers, to Thanos's forces, and even the Quill family when Quill leaves to avoid the pain of having to deal with the death of his mother. Though the Guardians themselves may argue and disagree occasionally, as Nebula states in *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2*, "All any of you do is yell at each other. You aren't friends," to which Drax replies "You're right, we're family." This shows the way in which all families have bad moments, but there is a difference between the bad moments that all families endure, and the trauma inflicted by them that causes psychological and physical damage. Further relating this back to godhood, the *Guardians* films are about being able to choose how to worship Christianity as an individual, as opposed to that which an individual is indoctrinated into believing. This is supported by Jeremy E. Uecker and Paul Froese who state that religious individualism comes about as a result of allowing individuals to have their own cultural preferences at the benefit of a religious text being able to hold their moral legitimacy (p.284, 2019). This shows how religious individualism can also be taken to opposing organized Christianity for the sake of being able to interpret the ideology of Christianity for themselves.

Conclusion

As the third phase of the MCU closes, it can only be questioned as to what will happen to the series in the future. The themes identified here, of godhood in relation to heroism and villainy (Thanos), the way in which God and humanity are one in the same within superheroes (Tony Stark/Iron Man), and the way in which the family are evocative of God (Guardians of the Galaxy) are likely to be continued into the future of the MCU, albeit not in the same way. Thanos teaches that God, and likewise superbeings, are no longer the unambiguous figures that can be blindly followed and revered for the enrichment of the individual's life. There may be expectations from such a deity to perform acts that the followers may not be entirely comfortable with, and as Gamora and Nebula display, followers have the right to leave should they find these acts abhorrent. Tony Stark/Iron Man on the other hand, teaches that being superheroic is as much a part of being human as it is about being godly. It is without Stark's vulnerable nature that he would not have created the Iron Man persona, and from this, would not have become the hero necessary to save the world countless times throughout the MCU, and it is as a result of him overcoming this vulnerability, that he is able to sacrifice himself to protect the universe itself from Thanos's desire for universal destruction. Finally, the Guardians of the Galaxy teach that family, much like religion, is not the stable institution that it is always believed to be, and this is a positive change, as it gives the public an opportunity to choose what is best for their own life, as opposed to what they are told is best for them through tradition. These conclusions were founded through the method of textual analysis. Here, textual analysis has been used to form the aforementioned ideas based on iconographic and semiotic themes throughout the MCU, and taking these themes and combining them with classical psychoanalytic and religious theory to uncover the link between superheroes and religiosity.

Future MCU films will continue to utilise the themes outlined throughout this thesis of the blurring of good and evil to give a more complex representation of villains, making them darker reflections of the heroes. These films will also most likely continue the way in which superheroes are represented as a spectrum of both man and God, as well as the way in which god can be found within families and the various

ways that can be represented. All of these can be found in the MCU's Phase Three closing film, *Spider-Man: Far from Home* (Directed by Jon Watts, 2019), which, due to time constraints, extensive textual analysis of this film was not possible. Starting with the blurring of good and evil, this can be found through the film's villain, Quentin Beck/Mysterio (Jake Gyllenhaal). Initially, Beck claims to be the sole survivor of an alternate universe which was destroyed by the Elementals with him and Spider-Man working together to stop them and save the world. However, Beck reveals himself to the audience to be an ex-employee of Tony Stark who was fired due to being 'unstable,' and with Stark taking the credit for his Binarily Augmented Retro Framing (B.A.R.F.) technology, which was used in the film to fake the Elementals. Prior to this reveal, Beck and Parker form a close paternal relationship akin to that held by Parker and Stark before his death. This likeness is even furthered when Parker lets Beck try on the E.D.I.T.H. (Even Dead, I'm the Hero) glasses, which helps Beck to uncannily resemble Stark. These similarities between Stark and Beck, along with Parker's close relationship with the two, allow the audience to be drawn into Beck's deception to the point that they can see him similar to how Parker sees him, allowing for Beck's representation to be blurred between that of a hero and a villain.

Far from Home also further displays the idea of Marvel heroes being a combination of man and God through Peter Parker/Spider-Man. Much like Stark/Iron Man, the two main ways in which this is done is through Spider-Man's superhuman abilities and Parker's psychological faults. Spider-Man's abilities include his super-strength, and his Spider-sense, or "Peter-Tingle" as it is known in the MCU, which is a precognitive sense towards avoiding danger. Likewise, Parker displays his psychological flaws through his insecurity. This is shown throughout *Far from Home* by his fear of his inability to live up to Iron Man. Throughout *Far from Home*, Parker is forced to consider the possibility of him being the 'new Iron Man,' a prospect that scares him, resulting in him attempting to avoid any reference to Iron Man, which is impossible due to the number of tributes seen in the background of shots throughout Europe, though not overtly mentioned. This is also shown in an early scene where Spider-Man is questioned by the press if he will be the new Iron Man, at which point he runs to the rooftops, where he finds himself dwarfed by a gigantic graffiti tribute to Iron Man. This shows how Parker feels like he is inescapably living in Iron Man's shadow. However, Parker's insecurity comes to a cathartic moment in a later scene where he

admits his grief and fears to Happy Hogan (Jon Favreau), the latter of which admits to Parker both that he misses Stark as well, and that he is not Tony Stark, granting Parker a newfound sense of confidence and relief. This shows the way in which Parker's insecurity at being the next Iron Man humanises him, while overcoming that insecurity allows him to become his own style of hero.

Finally, *Far from Home* also emphasises the relationship between the family and God, much like the *Guardians of the Galaxy* franchise, through Parker's familial relationships, most notably through his aforementioned relationships with Beck, and Fury, as well as his lesser-shown relationship with Hogan, and his maternal relationship with his Aunt May (Marisa Tomei) with the former three characters acting as differing replacements for Stark after his death, and the latter already acting as a maternal figure in place of Parker's own absent parents. However, the first two do so in different ways. Starting with Beck and Fury, both are depicted as false father figures due to the fact that both hide something about themselves for the sake of a goal. With Beck, Parker takes to him like a father figure in the same way that he took to Stark; however, unlike Stark, Beck is happy to encourage Parker to do as he pleases, such as pursuing MJ (Zendaya) as a potential romantic partner. However, much like the previous example of Ego from *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2*, Beck is later revealed to be evil, and has to be stopped by Parker. This exemplifies the idea of being deceived and used by paternal figures, as both Peter Quill/Star-Lord and Parker grow to trust their respective paternal figures, only for them to be let down by them, which in turn can be seen as a reflection of the way in which people feel about God. Likewise, Beck's use of illusions puts him in a position that posits him as a false God, and as such, when combined with his place as a father figure to Parker, alludes to the idea of the problematic paternal figure found so commonly throughout the *Guardians* franchise, and subsequently the idea of a problematic God.

Fury, in contrast is a much stricter paternal figure, who is more willing to chastise Parker for his shortcomings. However, as the post-credit scene reveals, the Fury that we see throughout the film is not actually him, but Talos (Ben Mendelsohn), a Skrull, which is a shape-shifting alien who has assumed his form at Fury's request to hide Fury's absence from Earth. As a result, Fury within *Far from Home* is also a false father

figure and God, as his true identity is hidden as a result of his superhuman powers. In contrast, Hogan is depicted as a positive father figure for Parker, and does so without any kind of hidden persona or agenda. Despite his indifferent nature towards Parker in *Homecoming*, since the loss of Stark, Hogan offers himself as a supportive paternal figure in Stark's place. This is shown from earlier evidence of him revealing his own grief at Stark's death, and his encouragement of Parker. In doing so, Hogan offers himself as a positive paternal figure to Parker, as well as encouraging him to continue as a superhero.

While it has been discussed on how the ideas discussed throughout this thesis could apply to future films, the potential problems of the future of superhero cinema must also be discussed. One problem that could arise is that of 'superhero fatigue'. Superhero fatigue is the idea that audiences will bore of superhero films and abandon them in favour of something new. Part of this comes from Steven Spielberg's prediction that superhero films will leave the public consciousness in the same way that Westerns did (Child, Ben. 2015); but the superhero film is as much a part of the American mythos as the Western is. Both focus on a hero character who is destined to save the world represented in the film, whether that world is a small Western town, or the universe itself, as well as having inherently American roots, with the Western taking place in American settlements early in American history, while the first superheroes were designed as a form of American propaganda against the Nazis. The key difference between the two is that, while Western films tend to glorify America, superhero films are just as willing to question it as they are to praise it. One example of this is through *Captain Marvel* (directed by Boden, A. and Fleck, R. 2019). In *Captain Marvel*, Carol Danvers (Brie Larson) is a Kree soldier tasked with stopping the alien race of Skrulls from finding the lightspeed engine on Earth, which her superiors claim can help them win the Kree-Skrull War. However, what is revealed throughout the narrative is not only that the Skrulls are refugees, hunted by the Kree for refusing to bow to their will, but that they want the lightspeed engine to escape from the reach of the Kree, and live peacefully. This story can be deemed as an allegory for the refugee crisis, particularly when Yon-Rogg (Jude Law) uses the word 'borders' to describe all within the Kree empire. Furthermore, Danvers discovering this, along with the fact that the Kree had been lying to her about her heritage and memories all along, display the way in which authority, specifically the American authority through

implication, must not be obeyed without questioning, for fear of being lied to or doing untoward harm. This displays the way in which superhero films act to question the American legacy in a way that creates sympathy towards those who are from outside the American way of life.

In contrast, classical, pre-Vietnam Western films generally glorify American history, while later ones criticize it. This is because, after the Vietnam War, the self-perception of America changed after witnessing the travesties caused by the American soldiers themselves towards the Vietnamese citizens, a sentiment mirrored by Michael Coyne, who claimed that the 1960s Western focused on drawing parallels with the Vietnam War (p.126, 2008). As Vietnam was the first televised war, this allowed the public to see the reality of warfare first-hand, and as a result, displays the demystification of the classic American hero, and by extension, America itself. This created the belief that America is not the glorious nation or ideology that many originally believed. Western films further mirrored this through the dilution of Western films that occurred after the Vietnam War, showing how the Western failed to maintain the relevance it once had, despite its attempts to adapt to the changes in society.

Another reason for the lack of superhero fatigue is the rise of right-wing and conservative extremism. Much like how the original Golden Age superheroes became popular at the time of the Second World War, modern superheroes are striking a chord in a similar way through the opposition to right-wing and conservative extremism that has been rising in recent years. An example of this is in *Black Panther* (Directed by Ryan Coogler, 2018), when, during the mid-credits scene, T'Challa (Chadwick Boseman), states that "In times of crisis, the wise build bridges, while the foolish build barriers." Likewise, the aforementioned example within *Captain Marvel* regarding the borders of the Kree empire further exemplifies this. These examples can be seen as references to President Donald Trump's promise to build a wall between the USA and Mexico as a means of curtailing immigration. Trump's stance on immigration, among other social and political discourses, has been known to act as a form of affirmation for right-wing and conservative extremism in America, displaying how, when taken in tandem with the examples given, the rise of right-wing extremism also, in an oppositional sense, causes a rise in superhero popularity, preventing

superhero fatigue. However, it is important to state that Trump himself is not a right-wing or conservative extremist, but his views themselves act as an affirmation for actual extremists. Art Spiegelman, in his controversial article on Golden Age superheroes, refers to this by likening Trump to the Red Skull, Captain America's most infamous villain, and comic book symbol of Nazism (2019). Again, while Trump may not be a Nazi in the purest sense, he does represent and affirm right-wing conservative extremism in contemporary America. Further evidence of this comes from the fact that, since Trump's inauguration into office, five of the nine MCU films released have grossed over $1 billion worldwide, with only one of the other four making less than $800 million. This financial evidence, particularly when contrasted with the films that released prior to Trump's reign, of which four of the fourteen made over $1 billion, showing less consistent box office returns than those during Trump's presidency, shows correlational evidence of how the rise of right-wing extremism has once again helped to influence and shape the rise of superheroes. But it must be remembered that correlation and causation are not the same, and therefore, the correlation cannot be taken as firm evidence without further study.

With regards to the future of the MCU in relation to the contents of this thesis, the theories used and discussed throughout will be less likely to maintain their relevance to the franchise. The main reason for the partially restrictive nature of these theories is that many of them come from white, male, middle-class scholars, such as Freud and Jung, and as such, their perspectives are more focused on these ideologies and identities. An example of this within Freud's work is the Oedipus Complex, which is the stage of psychosexual development that young boys undergo where they develop castration anxiety and develop a repressed sexual attraction to a mother figure, which is later resolved when the boy learns to identify with the father. Storey evidences this by stating that 'Freud was unsure how the Oedipus complex worked for girls' (p.101), and later going on to say that 'the manner in which Freud discusses the girl's experience of the Oedipus complex, especially the language he uses, seems to suggest that a real understanding of the process was not very important to him' (p.114). This shows how Freud's work is mainly focused on the masculine identity, and although he referred to the female identity in some areas, the majority of his focus was on the male psyche, and as such, it cannot be well-applied to the feminine psyche. Similar criticisms can likewise be applied to Jung and Campbell, as theorists that arose within

the same Western social norms as Freud, and with Campbell basing his theories upon those of Freud and Jung. The MCU has contrasted this with its diverse future, mostly focusing on more female and non-white protagonists. One example of this is *Thor: Love and Thunder* (Directed by Taika Waititi, 2022). Here, it has been announced that Jane Foster (Natalie Portman) will take the mantle of 'the Mighty Thor' from Chris Hemsworth's Thor, and likewise, that Valkyrie (Tessa Thompson) will be searching for her queen of Asgard after Thor passed his royal heritage on to her in *Endgame*. This shows, not only how the MCU will be branching out in terms of gendered representation, but also sexual representation, a topic that was also only covered briefly by Freud in regards to non-heterosexuality, and rarely touched on with regards to other scholars from within this thesis. Furthermore, to only use Freudian theory to explain such cultural shifts is reductionist, and must be taken in conjunction with contemporary societal theories. While Freudian theory has been used with Jung and Campbell throughout this thesis, all three theoretical stances have similarities that can subject them to heteronormative criticisms.

One further example of masculine heteronormativity within the aforementioned theories is with Joseph Campbell's Hero's Journey. The Hero's Journey refers to the hero as a male figure, insisting on male pronouns, while the females within the story are often described as being used to serve some momentary purpose to the story, most likely providing an item or opportunity, as opposed to having any proactive role within the story. An example of this is the phase known as 'the Woman as Temptress.' Here, a female figure within the story is designated with the aim of drawing the hero away from his task, a temptation the hero will likely overcome. This shows how feminine figures within the theory of the Hero's Journey rarely work to do more than serve the plot, raising the question of how such a prospect could work within a story which does not conform to masculine, hetero-normative standards. Again, *Thor: Love and Thunder* may potentially supply an answer, as it may be possible that Valkyrie may play the role of the Woman as Temptress within *Thor: Love and Thunder*, with Foster being announced as the new Thor, this makes her the hero, meaning that females are not purely part of a plot device as Campbell claimed, and are capable of being more active in the progression of the plot. However, it is important to note that the MCU have already begun on widening the representation present within their films. The two key examples of this are *Black Panther* and *Captain Marvel*, which

feature non-white and non-American representation and non-male representation respectively, with the latter actually featuring no white, male protagonists. With both of these films grossing over $1 billion, they prove that white male protagonists are no longer a necessity to cinematic superhero success, specifically in relation to Hollywood. However, it will only be with the future films of the MCU that this idea will be gratified or disproven.

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