

Borders of Masculinity: The Hero's Journey in the Marvel Cinematic Universe

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The Marvel Cinematic Universe has grown into one of the most popular entertainment franchises since its debut film in 2008. Even with competition rising in the superhero film industry, the MCU continues to stand out due to its unique and intricate depiction of the hero's journey. The three foundational heroes of the MCU (Iron Man, Captain America, and Thor) illustrate how toxic expressions of masculinity create borders to their emotional development and character growth, borders that they must overcome along the hero's journey. In his first film, *Iron Man*, Tony Stark begins to reevaluate the path that his father laid out for him when he undergoes a major moral transformation that makes him realize the violent impact of weapons manufacturing at Stark Industries. By becoming Iron Man, Tony makes a commitment to bettering himself and serving as a protector, but his insecurities continue to manifest into his public image as hero until his final appearance in *Avengers: Endgame*. Captain America, though not the most obvious depiction of toxic masculinity, struggles with

the same identity issues as Tony Stark. From his first film, *Captain America: The First Avenger*, Steve Rogers battles with insecurities that stem from always having been the "little guy." Steve constantly starts fights that he cannot win to stand up for others, and repeatedly enlists to the WWII draft despite being rejected due to poor health every time. His desperation to fulfill the hero role separates him from his only love, Peggy Carter, by an uncrossable border, time, until he gives these toxic traits up to return to her in *Avengers: Endgame*. Thor also struggles to fill his father's shoes as the king and protector of his home world, Asgard. His need to be seen as a hero and fierce warrior make him impulsive and quick to violence, which puts his kingdom at risk and bases his self-esteem on this image of himself. Though Thor's arc isn't finished yet, *Avengers: Endgame* illustrates his coping with his failure to fulfill this image as he rebuilds his self-esteem into his own identity. These three heroes demonstrate how toxic masculinity creates borders to their personal growth and progression along the hero's journey.

Superhero films in recent years have grown in popularity since the Marvel Cinematic Universe's, or MCU's, first movie debut in 2008. The MCU continues to stand out despite the now oversaturated market because of its unique illustration of the hero's journey. While all superheroes face obstacles and fight villains, Marvel's protagonists must overcome their own toxic perceptions of masculinity in order to truly step into the hero role. Even after many of them seem to become recognized heroes by their community, they continue to struggle with living up to their own perceptions of masculinity. The MCU depicts superheroes' emotional growth from boy to man alongside the traditional hero's journey, wherein hypermasculinity creates a border between them and their ability to reach true heroism by imposing hegemonic values onto their gender identity. As the heroes mature throughout their prospective films, they have to overcome hypermasculine tendencies within themselves—such as needing to assert dominance, impulsive violence, and the desire to be perceived as a hero—to undergo emotional growth and discern their identity. This illustration recognizes how the pressures of cultural expectations and gender performance create unattainable and aspirational models of masculinity that coerce men to conform within the social hierarchy. The three foundational heroes in the MCU—Iron Man, Thor, and Captain America—depict how hypermasculinity creates a border in their lives that blocks their character development by stunting their emotional growth and development of personal identity.

To understand masculinity's significant role within the male heroes of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, it is important to explain how it functions within sociocultural contexts to alter notions of male identity. In their research on diverse masculinities, scholars Douglas Schrock and Michael Schwalbe outline how hegemonic masculinity necessitates the performance of manhood, stating that this “requires mastering a set of conventional signifying practices through which the identity man is established” (279). These practices are absorbed into the understanding of their self-identity, making the aspiration to this masculine “ideal” indistinguishable from the individual. The traits associated with hegemonic masculinity may change depending on cultural and social contexts, but it follows the same schema regardless. Medical research on how social expectations of gender influence men's behaviors defines hegemonic masculinity as principles that establish a gendered social order through a combination of the “hierarchy of masculinities, differential access among men to power (over women and other men), and the interplay between men's identity, men's ideals, interactions, power, and patriarchy” (Jewkes, et al. S113). Internalization of culturally established gender roles imposes these values onto the formation of self-identity, constructing masculinity upon a foundation of power dynamics. Schrock and Schwalbe state that in the pursuit projecting this hegemonic ideal, “this means signifying a capacity

to exert control over oneself, the environment, and others” (286). Their research examines hypermasculine displays of these traits in men, such as failure to seek help, poor social support networks, and proximity to violence, that mirror the behaviors of the MCU heroes discussed further in this essay. These customs attempt to signal a “[capacity] to control one’s own life, to be invulnerable and needless of help, and to be fearless and hence not easily intimidated by others” (Schrock and Schwalbe 289). This understanding of hegemonic masculinity’s overarching influence on male identity and gender performance reveals the prominence of the masculine identity within the MCU hero’s journey.

Iron Man/Tony Stark

In Marvel Studios’s first film, *Iron Man*, Tony Stark’s struggle with hypermasculinity originates from his patchy relationship with his father as the effects of this trauma become distinguishable through his transformation into Iron Man. Tony grew up a boy genius turned playboy and, after his parents’ tragic death, inherited Stark Industries, his father’s tech and weapons development company. When Tony undergoes a major moral transformation, he is forced to confront the violence he has caused. In response to his introspection, Tony wrestles with his emotions as he considers leaving Stark Industries and the weapons business, wrestling with the idea aloud:

I never got to say goodbye to my father. There’s questions that I would have asked him. I would have asked him how he felt about what this company did. If he was conflicted, if he ever had doubts. Or maybe he was every inch the man we remember from the newsreels. I saw young Americans killed by the very weapons I created to defend them and protect them. And I saw that I had become a part of a system that is comfortable with zero accountability. (Favreau)

Tony’s perspective begins to shift and his guard comes down for the first time, revealing an internal struggle between ending his participation in further violence or upholding his father’s legacy. As the most prominent male role model in his life, Tony cannot help but wonder if his father had ever questioned the integrity of their business in the same way. As one of the most technologically advanced weapons manufacturers, Stark Industries represents hypermasculinity and the ultimate ability to assert control and dominance. Although Tony desperately wants to live up to his father’s image, he must let go of this symbol of violent masculinity to cross into his new frame of morality. By overcoming this border, Tony is able to find a new purpose in becoming Iron Man rather than continue the cycle of violence.



Tony Stark suits up to protect refugees from foreign militia in Afghanistan.

Tony Stark continues to struggle with how he fit into a masculine identity but as he begins to focus on genuinely living up to the hero role, his hypermasculinity only shifts into other areas of his life. He still yearns to be loved and wants to make up for his past, and Tony's suit quickly becomes a crutch for him to obtain these things. Stepping into his Iron Man suit creates a barrier that hides his past mistakes, only showing his hero persona to the rest of the world. This is where we see how his suit becomes a safe space that enables his need for validation, turning it into "a form of self-medication" that "strengthens his ingrained belief that the Iron Man suit is the only means of attaining his desired goal: to be a hero" (Wincherauk 45). The suit creates a physical and metaphorical border that shields the public from seeing Tony Stark. Instead, they only see the masculine figure he is projecting to the world. Although he believes his new identity as Iron Man is the key to his redemption, this plays into his hypermasculine tendencies explains how food studies can be used to identify systems within media: "Through identifying and studying food categories, it is possible to decode the religious, political, economic, social, and cultural systems in which food and food-centered practices are embedded" (5).

In *Captain America: Civil War*, a moral disagreement with Steve Rogers forces Tony to reevaluate his disposition to violence. After several years of working together, the Avengers team has become a family, but in this film, the "Sokovia Accords" drawn up by world governments divides them. The Sokovia Accords are meant to de-privatize the Avengers, allowing them only to work under the supervision of the United Nations. As the Avengers discuss whether or not to sign the accords, Stark pulls up a picture of a young college graduate who died during the gruesome battle in question. He explains, "He decided to

spend his summer building sustainable housing for the poor. Guess where, Sokovia. He wanted to make a difference, I suppose. We won't know because we dropped a building on him while we were kicking ass. There's no decision making process here. We need to be put in check!" (Anthony and Joseph Russo, *Civil War*). Until this moment, Tony had been sure about his actions as Iron Man, but he starts to question the good he has done as a hero similarly to the way he did with Stark Industries. Tony has seen the civilian lives lost as collateral damage, but he begins to recognize that his pursuit of heroism only shifted his need for power and control into a new outlet. explains how food studies can be used to identify systems within media: "Through identifying and studying food categories, it is possible to decode the religious, political, economic, social, and cultural systems in which food and food-centered practices are embedded" (5).

A division forms among the Avengers as they discuss the Sokovia Accords with Steve and Tony leading the opposing sides. Although Tony had previously thought the Avengers were protecting humanity, he now relates the Sokovia Accords to Stark Industries before he decided to end weapons manufacturing. Steve responds: "Tony, you chose to do that. If we sign this, we surrender our right to choose. What if this panel sends us somewhere we don't think we should go? What if there's somewhere we need to go and they don't let us? We may not be perfect but the safest hands are still our own" (Anthony and Joseph Russo, *Civil War*).



The Avengers face off, divided by Tony Stark's and Steve Rogers's moral differences.

Steve and Tony in this scene are at odds over how to handle conflict going forward, both having different opinions over what course of action would breed less violence. Steve Rogers is often hailed for his "uncompromising purity and resolve" as a hero that prefers to

use non-lethal force (Roblou 174). He is morally sound and confident in his role as a hero, but when Tony is forced to confront the victims of his actions, he reevaluates the choice he made to end the cycle of violence by becoming Iron Man. Tony's initial struggle with a violent and control-oriented concept of masculinity makes him unsure of his own judgment and overly concerned with his public image as a hero. The ghost of his hypermasculinity makes him insecure and favor supervision over the Avengers operating privately, but this forms a border that tears the Avengers apart.

In Iron Man's final appearance in the MCU, *Avengers: Endgame*, Tony finally transgresses hypermasculinity and makes peace with himself as he becomes a true hero. Initially, he refuses to help the Avengers with this final mission in order to protect the normal life and family he had built. He eventually confides in his wife, Pepper, that he cannot escape his conscience: "Something tells me I should put it in a lock box and drop it to the bottom of the lake, and go to bed," to which she responds, "But would you be able to rest?" (Anthony and Joseph Russo, *Endgame*). Tony's moral transformation in Iron Man leaves him unable to ignore his role as a hero, "he must live with his commitment to better himself" (Wincherauk 47). At the end of the film, he declares "I am Iron Man" just before sacrificing his life, signifying his acceptance of his past mistakes and final transformation into a hero. He gives up the peaceful life he had with his family to save innumerable lives, and in his absence he passes on his responsibilities as a hero to the remaining Avengers. Although Tony Stark began his journey as a reckless playboy with questionable morals and a distorted sense of masculinity, he was able to achieve true heroism in his final moments by breaking down the barrier of hypermasculinity that blocked his emotional growth.



Tony declares "I am Iron Man" as he reverses the final battle against Thanos.

Captain America/Steve Rogers

Out of all of the Avengers, Captain America is generally not the first hero whose masculinity would be called into question, but his character is built on his feelings of inadequacy. Before Steve Rogers became Captain America, he was just a short, scrawny boy that struggled to get a date. This gave Steve a fragile sense of masculinity that made him feel the need to prove himself as a man. When World War II began, he repeatedly tried to enlist in the military despite being denied countless times for his small stature. When the military notices his falsified enlistment forms, they question him, uncovering his motives. He says, “I don’t want to kill anyone. I don’t like bullies. I don’t care where they’re from” (Johnston). Steve feels an overwhelming desire to defend others because he has been the “little guy” his whole life, but this does not mean he was already the perfect hero. Because of Captain America’s symbolism for American perseverance and morality, he is often seen as “a champion of the American dream and its ideals, though his posture has not always been as clear-cut as one would expect” (Roblou 174). Despite his size and lack of muscle, Steve is shown in the first few scenes constantly getting himself into fights that his friend, Bucky, has to end. Although he knows he will not win, Steve feels an overwhelming desire to defend others to compensate for his fragile masculinity. Like Iron Man with wealth and control, Steve’s insecurities manifest hypermasculinity by leading him to seek validation and assert his physical strength.



Steve gazes at Peggy through a glass window during the time travel mission.

This creates one of the most important aspects of Steve’s character arc by separating him from his first and only love, Peggy Carter. At the end of *Captain America: The First*

Avenger, Steve must crash an airplane into the Arctic Ocean to avoid hitting New York City with a stockpile of nuclear bombs. He remains frozen in the ice for almost 70 years, but when he wakes up he enters a new world in which he has, and always will be, a symbol of heroism and uncompromising morality for his actions in World War II. Although he obtains the identity he has always wanted before undergoing his transformation into Captain America, he spends the rest of his time in the MCU longing to go back in time and live out a peaceful life with Peggy. Because he chose the role of a hero, he was separated from Peggy by a seemingly uncrossable border: time. Near the end of *Avengers: Endgame*, Steve must use the Avengers's new time travel technology to return the Infinity Stones back to their proper timelines, one of which brings him back to the 1940s. He returns seemingly seconds later but shocks the Avengers by coming back as an elderly man. Steve explains, "Well, after I put the stones back, I thought maybe I'll try some of that life Tony was telling me to get... It was beautiful" (Anthony and Joseph Russo, *Avengers: Endgame*). In the decade that Steve spent living in the future, he realized that his fragile masculinity and desire to fulfill the hero role had overshadowed the only thing that could truly make him happy. Rather than returning immediately to continue his role as Captain America, he let go of this part of his identity to cross back over the time border and live the remainder of his life with Peggy.

Thor

Arguably the most obvious depiction of hypermasculinity in the Marvel Cinematic Universe is Thor's origin film. Thor's desire to fulfill the hero role stems from his upbringing as the future king of his home world, Asgard, but this desire to conform to the values of hegemonic masculinity makes him overzealous and quick to violence. Like Iron Man, he wants to prove that he can "make things happen," "resist being dominated by others," and live up to his father's great legacy (Schrock 280).

THOR: The Jotuns must learn to fear me, just as they once feared you

ODIN: That's pride and vanity talking, not leadership. You've forgotten everything I taught you about a warrior's patience.

THOR: While you wait and be patient, the Nine Realms laugh at us! (Branagh)

Thor desperately wants to fill his father's shoes, but this makes him prideful and quick to violence. Odin conquered all of the enemies that threatened his kingdom and Thor longs for his own opportunity for glory. This had already put his friends and kingdom in danger, making Odin realize his son's immaturity: "I was a fool to think you were ready" (Branagh). Thor is stripped of his title, powers, and sent across space to live on Earth as punishment. The pressure to perform within this model makes him violent and prideful; overcoming the border that hypermasculinity creates within his identity allows him to become a true hero

and noble king.

In *Avengers: Endgame*, Thor struggles to cope with his failures as a hero; his pride and heroic image of himself collapses, and he loses his sense of self-worth. Although all of the remaining Avengers are struggling with loss and survivor's guilt at this point, Thor's decline is the hardest to ignore, mostly because of the beer-belly he's grown. Instead of the chiseled god of thunder shown in past films, Thor has become a deadbeat drunk that spends most of his time playing video games. Though his appearance is used as comic relief in this film, his physical decline reflects his emotional journey from an overly confident god to a broken man. In his article on "Fat Thor," Gregory Wakeman writes "There's no doubt that the new Thor embodies a more complex and vulnerable version of masculinity, and *Endgame* shows that even a god like him, who has the 'picture perfect' looks, can be affected by trauma, can be mentally fragile." Thor puts up walls to avoid his pain, cutting him off from his friends and dissolving the overly confident person he used to be. Because he tries to avoid the pain and grief he feels, "[he] goes from being a perfectly chiseled, confident, and arrogant god to a decrepit alcoholic who suffers from a panic attack during a mission" (Wakeman). Thor's character takes a complete turn from who he previously was, and the once mighty god of thunder now spends his days in hiding, closed off even from those closest to him. Thor has built much of his self-image on his role as a hero and cannot cope with his shortcomings.



Thor passed out while the Avengers plan their final mission.

He struggles to accept his failure to prevent the death of his entire family, the destruction of his home planet, and now half of all living things in the universe. Thor's emotions send him into a downward spiral and the state of his mental health makes it difficult for him to

regain his confidence, making him surprised when he is still worthy enough to wield his hammer. His pride and desire to fill the hero role are expressions of hypermasculinity that create a border keeping him from confronting his emotions and learning to accept himself. He cannot live up to the unattainable image he has of masculinity, and though his arc is not finished he's within the MCU, he begins to let go of these expectations of himself by the end of the film.

Conclusion

The Marvel Cinematic Universe uncovers the connection between heroism and hypermasculinity through its protagonists' character arcs. In all of their personal struggles, masculinity and the pressure to perform are at the root, making them assert dominance, act with violence, and question their self-worth. Although many of these men had already become recognized heroes across the universe, they continued to struggle with their sense of self until they let go of their hypermasculine tendencies. Whenever these heroes try to live up to the explains how food studies can be used to identify systems within media: "Through identifying and studying food categories, it is possible to decode the religious, political, economic, social, and cultural systems in which food and food-centered practices are embedded" (5). standards they set for themselves, they are submitting to their insecurities and fulfilling their need for validation. The Marvel Cinematic Universe continues to stand out from other superhero film creators because of the emotional growth that its characters undergo by struggling with the idea of heroism itself. Throughout their films, they grapple with overcoming the border that hypermasculinity creates in their own lives until they gain self-acceptance. The MCU recognizes the connection between the hero's journey and masculinity by reinventing this iconic characterization to uncover the consequences it has on men's lives.

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